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# P B T T A

**Bulletin of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh**  
**New Series. Volume 3 Number 1. December 2005 - January 2006**

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## **Field Outings**

### **December**

There will be no outing in December due to the BSAP Camp to Dehra Dun.

### **January - 2006**

**Sunday, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2006: Manjira Barrage and Bird Sanctuary - Medak District. Route: Kukatpally - BHEL Ramchandrapuram - ICRISAT - to Sangareddy Town. Turn left before the Sangareddy Mandal Office and follow the road to the EEC near the lake.** The lake is good for waterfowl, particularly the diving ducks like the Pochards and Brahminy Ducks. Waders are also a possibility. The bay near the boat landing stage is good for Cotton and Lesser and Large Whistling Teal. Also of interest are the breeding colonies of Painted and Openbilled Storks on the islands in the lake. There are added attractions of Osprey, maybe Barheaded Geese, Gulls and Terns (3 different species were once seen). There are sure to be some Wagtails around and maybe also some woodland birds in the area near the pumping station on the lakeshore and around the EEC. Keep an eye open for Marsh Crocodiles (not the ones in their enclosure in the EEC!) on the lake. There is a large one often to be seen basking near the boat landing stage. If exceptionally lucky, you may even be able to get a sight of Demoiselle Cranes. This will be a full-day trip. Carry water and packed lunches. For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3093 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 30981)**.

## **NEWS & NOTES**

### **Field Trip of the Society to Shamirpet Lake 27<sup>th</sup> November 2005**

The morning of Sunday, 27th November was cloudy, with a light wind blowing. BSAP members collected at the Punjagutta Crossroads, in anticipation of the trip to Shamirpet. This is always an exciting destination as it has produced many surprises in the past. We were all pleasantly looking forward to a very interesting trip, and we were not disappointed.

Having reached the place, we decided that since we had not obtained permission to enter the Deer Park, we would confine our activities to the lake shore that abuts the park boundary. There are a couple of check dams constructed here by the Forest Department, and the lake shore is nearby with some interesting reedbeds and bays. All of which were very rewarding from the twitcher's point of view.

We started off with notching up the more common varieties such as the Whitebreasted Kingfisher, whose loud ringing call commands attention. These calls followed us for some considerable time; the birds were obviously falling over themselves to get noticed. Then we noticed the first of the grassland birds - a Paddyfield Pipit! The Shamirpet lake shore is renowned for larks and pipits and we were hoping that we would see more. But more of that as the day goes on...

Some of the group were having more luck at one of the rock ponds. There was a Whitebreasted Waterhen in the area and while some of the members were staring at it, others were interested in the waders that were to be seen. A Common Sandpiper was one and the other was the larger Green Sandpiper. Shafaat Saab was interested to know why the name "Green". He couldn't see any 'green' anywhere on the bird. So how come the name: an interesting observation! Any clues, anyone!

Pipits continued to appear here and there - here a Paddyfield, there an Indian and still further, a Tawny Pipit. Not to be outdone, other species also appeared. A small flock of Small Green Bee-eaters appeared, eagerly hawking insects and midges in the cool morning air. Wagtails of the Grey variety appeared, interspersed with the more common Large Pied. Then, as we got closer to the shore and could see a considerable portion of the water, we saw ducks on the lake...! And not only ducks - Aasheesh alerted us to the presence of Terns - three Indian River Terns sat on a flat rock in the lake, periodically taking off and skimming around. There is no more elegant bird in flight than these - the grace and expertise they show on the wing has to be seen to be believed.

Nandu notices a very diminutive little chappie sitting in solitary contemplation in the midst of a flowering Ipomoea bush. The telescope is trained on this little fellow and it is identified as a Common Blue Kingfisher - shy little cousin of the more brash Whitebreasted Kingfishers that are still rudely screaming out to each other in the background. But while Nandu is still exclaiming over his kingfisher, larks appear on the ground.

Foremost of these, of course is the Ashy-crowned Finch Lark. Sharada notices the first one and she is almost taken in with the resemblance to a Sparrow. The little Ashy-crowns do bear an uncanny resemblance to sparrows, owing to their stout bills and very dumpy bodies. Before we can appreciate them, another, more interesting species of lark makes its appearance. Loud exclamations from Humayun proclaim the presence of the Sykes' Crested Lark, an endemic species that is restricted to the Deccan region and one of the few endemic species that is still to be seen in reasonable numbers from time to time. There are a few of these birds around and the members go ecstatic. Also a small flock of Ashy-crowned Finch Larks, busy with their ablutions in the shape of sand baths.

Impatient for a good view of the ducks on the lake, Humayun decides to go on ahead. Moving cautiously towards the lake shore, he puts up another Green Sandpiper and a couple of the Common ones. Then a small wading bird attracts attention. The distinctive colouring of the Little Ringed Plover is obvious. Stifling a yelp of ecstasy, binoculars are trained on this little fellow who probes around in the mud at the lake edge. The small beak of this plover gives it a curiously snub-nosed look. But the colouring is delicate and very tasteful. However, the call of the ducks is greater so it is ho for a large rock that provides a convenient screen to the approach of the twitcher, on the far side of which the ducks are disporting themselves.

Getting behind the rock, the birders creep around it and get into view of the ducks, at the same time as the ducks get a look at the motley crowd! With loud clapping of wings and sundry quacks of alarm, the flock takes off, circles the water a couple of times and then lands some little distance away. Binoculars and telescope are now trained on these birds and identification commences. Foremost is the Pintail, with the drake sporting its very distinctive chocolate coloured head and neck and the long "pin" on its tail. There are also a couple of very colourful Widgeons some distance away. The drake swims around his flock of 7 hens. He seems to be having some little trouble in preventing them from straying. Herding them together he drives them towards the reedbeds, occasionally scolding them with a low quack. Further away, there is a flock of about 7 or 8 Redcrested Pochards. They keep to themselves, as befits birds of higher status than the common herd. A small flock of Teal flashes past - identified as Common Teal. There are also sundry Cotton Teal and a few Spotbills dotted on the surface of the lake. Not a bad day for ducks: or for birdwatchers either, for the matter of that!

But now thoughts turn in the direction of some sustenance. Birding is very hungry work - and when there is a profusion of interesting birds, it gets that much hungrier! So it is perch on convenient rocks on the lake shore and out with the foodstuffs - spicy egg sandwiches and hot *chai*! What a wonderful way to appreciate nature! A Brahminy Kite, flying on the far shore seems to agree - he finds a titbit from the surface of the lake and hies himself away to a convenient rock of his own. Through the telescope, we are able to see that he is tucking into something too. The Little Ringed Plover decides to pay us another visit - and yet another Green Sandpiper pops up as well. We still haven't got around to solving the name game...

Having finished the snacking, finding the sun getting uncomfortably active, we decide to retreat. The timing is impeccable for hardly have we turned our steps towards the waiting cars, when Openbilled Storks are spotted floating down to the lake. Two land in the reeds close to the return path and we feast our eyes on these interesting birds. One of them is very conveniently positioned to show off the prominent gap in its bill, through which we can see the grass on the other side of the chap! Closer to the cars, a Brown Shrike also comes into sight. He has the distinction of being one of the last species to go on the day list. A few minutes later the birders are in their cars and pointed citywards. A very entertaining morning, greatly enjoyed by all present. I only wish more people would try and make it to these field trips!

## Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

**I**t has been represented to me that I seem to have forgotten the one bird species that might be said to epitomize the term "Urban". I refer, of course, to that common fellow, the Feral Pigeon; the chaps that are to be seen on almost every available apartment ledge in large, even impressive numbers.

I admit my omission. But I plead not guilty to having forgotten them. I did not forget them; rather I was hesitant as to whether these birds qualify for inclusion in these memoirs. Dealing, as we are, with birds of wild ancestry

that have moved into the city, the feral pigeons, which have now more domestic blood than wild in their veins, hardly seem to be the ideal candidates for these notes. However, now that they have been thrust on me, I may as well tell their tales!

At one time, in the days of long ago, most of the pigeons that were seen in the cities belonged to a mixture of wild and domestic stock. Although they had a generous mixture of the blood of pouters, racers, angoras and other such exotics, the base stock still remained the wild Blue Rock Pigeons; which species the birds still markedly resemble. But somewhere along the line, the wild strain has almost passed out of the birds, and now we would be very wrong if we were to put them down in the list as Blue Rock Pigeons. But if these birds are not Blue Rocks, then this brings up the interesting question as to how we are to identify the true Blue Rocks, assuming we see them.

Though I may sound a pessimist, I personally believe that the wild strain of the Blue Rock Pigeons is almost extinct, with the admixture of so much exotic genes in the species. People may argue that since the plumage of the birds has not changed all that much, it is possible that there is still a fair amount of wild stock mixed in, but I believe that the plumage still endures only because it is suited to their habitat and has nothing to do with the gene pools. However, these notes are not meant to be a discussion in the science of genetics and blood banks, so we will confine ourselves to the birds themselves and let the scientists worry about these technicalities. (I never claimed to be a scientist, myself!).

There is a fairly large flock of these birds in the balcony these days. They find the grain in the food tray much to their liking and spend much time strutting around, with puffed out chest, cooling richly, occasionally condescending to hurriedly peck up a few grains of whatever is on offer (usually *jowar* seeds). The cock birds particularly, take much pleasure in flaunting their plumage, which is indeed quite pleasant; particularly the purple sheen on the feathers of the neck and mantle. With pouted chest and erect stance, he courts the many hens around and, should his little act meet with their approval, he hurriedly performs the duties that nature ordained for him and then unabashedly proceeds to flaunt himself to the other hens milling around! The first, meanwhile, has found the grain again and is pecking away at it, quite unconcerned about the amorous intentions of her erstwhile mate.

In the doves too, these birds are popular. I suspect that the original inhabitants of the doves were popular exotic breeds, which quickly reverted to the wild and brought their cousins back to live with them in the comparative comforts of the doves and the prospect of regular and easy meals. I remember that I myself once nursed an ambition to start up my own dove. To this end, a pair of some species of pigeon (I cannot now remember which they were) was procured and housed in a very large earthen pot slung on the top of a metal pole in the garden. After many days, the birds were allowed their liberty and a liberal supply of grain and other delicacies was spread around the garden to tempt them to stay there. When next I saw the pair, they were disporting themselves with a flock of feral pigeons in the balconies of the apartment building opposite the house. (The pot remained where it was and became an ancestral home for a pair of Magpie Robins,

which successfully nested therein for more than 4 consecutive years!).

The incident taught me that the lure of flocks is very strong in most species of birds that habitually live in this state. Certainly the birds that I had procured could never have known what a flock was, since I had got them as squeakers from a pet shop. Yet, when confronted with their own kind, they gave up the easy life of regular meals and a safe roost and preferred to link their lot with their wilder, (I will not call them wild), compatriots.

There were times, when I was considerably younger than I am now, when we young lads used to wander around with catapults and air guns in search of birds which could be put to culinary uses. Pigeons were usually high up on this list, since they were easily procurable and were generally termed as excellent eating by the adults who had experience in such matters. There was a considerable colony close to the house, where the birds nested in convenient holes in a stone wall adjoining a lake. Alas, that wall is now a monstrosity of wrought iron and cement and the colony has long since been disbanded. But in those early days, this was our preferred hunting ground and we spent many patient days watching the movement of the birds to determine which ones had a family and which not; (we never shot at family birds). Once we had identified targets, we would attempt to get within range, an almost impossible task with these very wary birds. We were aided in our efforts by a small stream which ran at the foot of the wall and which was used regularly by local villagers and fishermen passing to and fro, which the birds tolerated. So we rolled up our trousers, removed our shoes and took the stream, and generally were able to pot a bird or two. Until that fateful day when one of my companions became the object of attention to a large and repulsive leech in the depths of the stream – an incident that completely ended our warfare on the pigeon colony – at least at that particular place.

Those old days are long gone now and I no longer wage war on the pigeons. Instead, I provide them with food and water and listen to their very contented cooling in the balcony. The birds are a constant source of delight to my little daughter as well. She is fascinated by their antics and is happiest when perched in her stroller in the balcony, with a cup of grain in front of her, which she periodically dips into and scatters around her with the air of a mediaeval monarch distributing largesse to the subjects. Only the subjects in this case are a posse of those very genetically interesting birds, the common Feral or Blue Rock Pigeons.

Interestingly enough, I have never encountered this species anywhere except in town or city limits. You may occasionally see a flock of them in some area close to a village, where they are usually busy doing battle on the ripening grain, but for the most part they stay in the city and proceed about their business on the ledges and roofs of apartment buildings, the higher the better. They seem to be the only species I know that has managed to exploit the apartment blocks to their advantage. Most of the other species of birds that did well in urban and suburban



gardens is defeated by the apartment blocks, but the pigeons have circumvented this difficulty and have turned these structures to their own advantage. So much so that now they are perfectly at home in them and go about their business in these surroundings as though they belong nowhere else. A bonus point to the apartment buildings for this, in my humble opinion!

When not disturbed, the birds are fairly confiding. I have had a couple of them come and take grain from my hand in the balcony. And even when I am standing right next to the tray, a few brave chaps pace sedately forward to the tray and help themselves, occasionally standing on my feet to do so. Even if I have occasion to wave my hands to scare away the crows, they are not unduly bothered, seeming to think that such antics are

only to be expected from a race such as we humans are; lacking in intelligence which is so much a hallmark of their clan (the pigeons, that is!!).

So, if you live in apartment blocks, or happen to have one in your vicinity, I cannot see how you can fail to have seen a small, medium or even large flock of these birds in your area. And if they puzzled you as to their ancestry, be comforted with the thought that you are not the only ones. I wager that only the pigeons themselves know their ancestry – it is beyond the skill of this writer, at least. Keep watching the Pigeons (whether Feral or Semi-Domesticated, or Wild Blue Rock). Until next month – happy birding!!

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

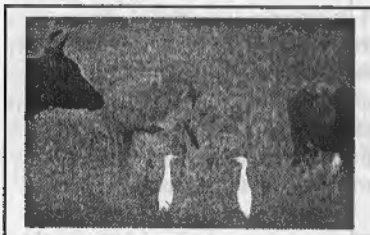
### THE CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*)

**T**he Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) is one of our commonest egrets and is often encountered wherever there is a little water or even in fallow fields or grasslands where cattle are grazing. The common name comes from its penchant for following herds of cattle to pasture and exploiting the abundance of ticks and other parasites that are to be found on cattle. Also, a feeding cattle herd is bound to put up several locusts and other insects, which are all ready prey for the egrets.

The Cattle Egret is a hen-sized bird, with distinctly long neck and legs. The sexes are similar. The characteristic identification feature is the colour of the bill, which is either dull orange or yellow – which distinguishes it from the similar sized Little Egret, which has a dark bill. In the breeding season, the adult develops buffy feathers around the head, neck and back. They are very widely distributed throughout the Indian Sub-continent.

They are a distinctly social species and are most often encountered in small flocks scattered over the area they may have chosen. When they attend a herd of cattle, they often ride on the backs of the animals, or stalk around in their midst, keeping their eyes open for insects, lizards or frogs that may be disturbed by the animals. They are partial to little mice when they can find them. When found in the vicinity of water bodies, they may be seen fishing for frogs or small fingerlings.

The nesting season for these birds is generally around November to March, just after the monsoons are ended and food is abundant. They are colonial nesters and build large and untidy nests in mixed company with other egrets and herons, storks and cormorants. For preference the birds select large leafy trees, but do not insist that they should be near water. The nest is an untidy collection of twigs, grasses and other assorted odds and ends. In Vedanthangal bird sanctuary, a nest composed almost entirely of twigs and cloth rags was once noticed. Both the sexes share in the domestic duties, though there is evidence that the bulk of the incubation is done by the female. The eggs are pale blue in colour and around 3 to 5 are generally laid.



Lack of suitable habitat is gradually making these birds more scarce. Though their shift from jheels and ponds to waterlogged paddy fields and grasslands would be of help, the paucity of suitable nesting areas (heronries) is having an adverse impact on the breeding ecology of the birds. As with all species, they require protection urgently to allow them to re-breed their losses and build up viable populations throughout their range.



**We wish our members a very happy and prosperous New Year 2006**

#### For Private Circulation Only

For information, write to: Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India.

Editors: Siraj A. Taher, Humayun Taher.

Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: [baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk); [humayun.taher@gmail.com](mailto:humayun.taher@gmail.com)

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## **February - 2006**

### **Field Outings**

**Sunday, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2006: Palmakole Tank - Shamshabad - Route: Zoo Park - Shivarampally - Shamshabad Road** - The tank comes on the left side of the road after Shamshabad/Shahpur. This tank is good for ducks and other interesting birds. There is a sighting of Desert Wheatear from this place and there should be some interesting larks and other scrubland birds around as well. The primary objective though, will be on the waterfowl census for A.P.

**Sunday, 26<sup>th</sup> February 2006: ICRISAT Campus - Patancheru - Medak District. Route: Kukatpally - BHEL Ramchandrapuram - ICRISAT.** This is one of the best-known venues for both water and grassland birds. There are sure to be lots of ducks on all the lakes, particularly the diving ducks such as the Pochards and Brahminy Ducks. Shovellers and Naktas are a further bonus. Harriers should be around and a couple of Aquila Eagles too. Lots of waders and shorebirds and also Storks, Herons and Spoonbills. Even a few Geese are a possibility. Keep an eye open for the very interesting Pied Harrier. In the grassland category look for lots of larks and pipits and, if exceptionally lucky, the Ground Owl and, best of all, maybe a Lesser Florican. Near the Red Lakes there will be lots of waders in the paddy fields and the heronries of Grey Herons and Black and White Ibis. Turumtis are seen in this area and the odd Peregrine Falcon also is known from this area. Tawny Eagles nest on the campus and could be seen. Peafowl are quite a common sight. There are also lots of other birds to look out for. It shouldn't be too difficult to get the 100 at this venue.

For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3093 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

### **Indoor Meeting**

**Monday, 20<sup>th</sup> February 2006: Venue: Vidya Raniya School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad; Time 6.00 P.M.**  
Talk and Film Show on Pelicans by K. Manu of the Mysore Amateur Naturalists Association.

## **NEWS & NOTES**

### **Field Trip of the Society to Manjira 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2006**

**T**he trip provided sightings of more than 60 species, one of the best trip lists that has been seen for a long time. Also commendable was the turnout of the members - over 30 people turned up for this outing. But let us begin at the beginning.

We started out from Punjagutta almost on time - only about 10 minutes behind schedule at around 6.40, reaching the destination at around 8.15. Just before getting to the lake, we were rewarded with a sighting of a Pied Myna. This is an interesting sighting as it indicates that the species is spreading

through the Hyderabad region. We had a sighting of this species for the first time in Sanjivayya Park. Then there was one sighting late last year at Rouriyal and now here. I think this would be an interesting study to do a monograph on the redistribution of the Pied Myna in the region.

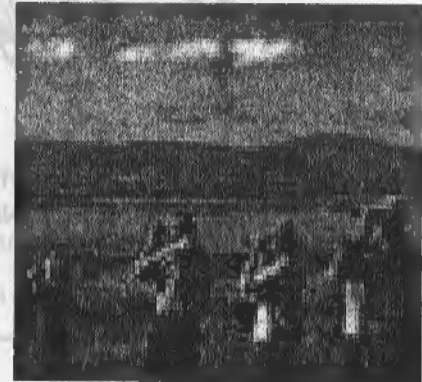
However, by now we have reached our destination. One of the first things to be done was, of course, to get in touch with the forest department staff who were expecting us and were supposed to keep the department boat ready for us to visit the heronries on the islands in the middle of the lake. However, it turned out that the staff were expecting us much later. The mistake was soon rectified and the boatmen were despatched to the town to obtain petrol and kerosene for the

engine. Meanwhile, we waited and watched the birds – which were appearing everywhere. Large Cuckoo Shrikes were observed leaping about in the trees near the pumping station and, as we craned our necks to look, a Golden Oriole materialised on a nearby tree. Wiretailed and Redrumped Swallows appeared and a Tickell's Blue flycatcher gave us a brief glimpse. Green and Blue-tailed Bee-eaters were all over the place. Peafowl called and Grey Partridge answered. We decided to head up the bund and feast our eyes on the plethora of birds we confidently expected would greet us. However, we were in for a disappointment for, when we topped the bund, there was a singular lack of bird life in the area. It seemed almost barren but, by peering between the reeds and scanning the area with binos, we began to see the feathered denizens; Cotton Teal appeared, as also Lesser Whistling Teal. Large flocks of Glossy Ibis were seen in the distance. Closer to our side, Common Pochards were sighted, a couple of Spotbill and some Widgeon also. Both species of Moorhen (Indian and Purple), were present, and also both species of Jacana (Bronzewinged and Pheasant-tailed). Black and White Ibis also appeared giving us a full hand. Then the first of the *Aquilas* appeared – in the shape of a Steppe Eagle. There was some dissent on the identification but we finally managed to pin it down.

Moorty now appeared, announcing the presence of waders – he still has not got over his wader fetish; and much prefers them to any other species of birds. He announced that there were quite a few of his special feathered friends on the far shore, in some rice paddies. Having made this announcement, he then hurried off to see whether he could identify them. The rest of the group meanwhile, scanned the lake, looking at the Painted and Openbilled Storks flying around the large islands on which they nest. Meanwhile the forest department boatmen were struggling to get the engine installed on the boat and getting it to work. It turned out that the engine had completely outlived, not only its normal working life, but also its normal non-working life. It had more or less given up the ghost but funds for a replacement were still in the process of being allocated. The boatmen told us that they could do the trip but it would be slow going and, quite possibly, there could be several unscheduled delays. Having said that, the first group of about ten birders climbed into the boat and headed off – led by Moorty himself!

Kulkarni then took it into his head that it would be more comfortable to wait his turn in the boat by repairing to where the cars were parked and indulging in a bit of snacking. Accordingly, we descended and began on the foodstuffs – breaking off occasionally to stare at other interesting birds, chief of which was a nesting Brahminy Kite near the EEC, where we had parked the cars. Once we had stuffed ourselves well, we went back to the bund to continue watching birds. Grey and Purple Herons also appeared and Little Cormorants began to be visible. Just then we observed the boat returning. Having decanted its first load, it then took on a second load of birdwatchers, led this time by a reluctant Aasheesh; and it was ho for the islands again. Moorty meanwhile, breathlessly recounted sightings of Greater Spotted and Tawny Eagles and also considerable flocks of Pochards of the common sort. But he seemed also to be somewhat distracted and Humayun suddenly found himself tagging along behind him as, a

telescope over his shoulders, he set off on his indefatigable pursuit of waders again. We located a couple in the rice paddies on the other side of the bay and, fixing them in the telescope, we were able to identify them as Marsh Sandpipers. Fortunately, once the identification was made, Moorty pronounced himself satisfied and agreed, albeit a bit wistfully, to leave the waders behind and try looking at other birds also. He soon proved to be true to his word as he first pointed out a Tawny Eagle and then another large raptor that was quickly identified by our resident raptorophile as the Greater Spotted Eagle. Then another eagle appeared on the scene – seen in silhouette it had a narrow tail, very broad wings and a very big head – no marks for guessing the identity of the Short-toed Eagle.



Eventually the boat returned with the second lot of birders and the third lot set off – though not without some foreboding because the second batch had warned that the boat was misbehaving a lot. However, we finally decided to take the chance and so set off. Humayun climbed onto the gunwale (a-la the *Titanic*) and, from that vantage point scanned the lake from side to side, looking at what was on offer. Little Cormorants appeared, chasing small schools of fish that were so eager to get away from the predator that they skimmed over the surface of the water almost like flying fish. However, when the cormorants saw this huge fishy thing bearing down on them, they got a fright almost similar to the one they were giving the fish. With loud flaps and sundry squawks, they laboured up from the water and fled.

Closing on the islands, we started spotting Large Cormorants – a few of them were apparently getting ready to build their nests. We also saw a few White Ibis on their nest. Openbilled Storks were already on their nests, but the Painted Storks were just starting to build. A medium sized raptor perched on a small dead tree first deceived us into believing that it was a Marsh Harrier: before an incautious movement gave it away and we found that our Marsh Harrier was actually an Osprey. The Osprey took off from his twig and sailed around a bit before finally disappearing into the trees of the islands.

We rounded the island, encountering a large colony of Darters on the far side when the unexpected (or maybe the expected – unexpected) happened. The boat died on us! The motor gave a couple of strange hiccupping noises and just faded out. In the sudden silence that enveloped us, someone whistled a few bars of "Lost at Sea..."!

The boatmen, undaunted by this little episode, heroically set about putting things right. They hauled up the propeller, laid it lovingly on its side and, with many endearing epithets and entreaties, pleaded with it to behave itself and start working



again. The motor unfortunately, was not having any of it and steadfastly refused to concede the stand it had taken. We looked around to see how far we were from the dam and, rather to our surprise, we found that we were a considerable distance away. However, there was nothing for it but to do some work so we took up paddles and, directed by the boatmen who continued to tinker with the engine, we paddled heroically for the bund. En-route, while we were negotiating a patch of ipomoea, we saw a strange sight. A Large Cormorant was in the water right in the path of the approaching boat. Moreover, he was fully aware of the boat bearing down on him, because he was frantically flapping his wings and doing his best to get away. But he appeared to be making no progress, except to be pulled further under the water. Then we saw that he had been caught in a fisherman's net and could not get away. Here is a chance for the birdwatchers to show their good-samaritan stuff. So, when the boat hove alongside the trapped bird, Shafaat Saab reached down and grabbed the bird while the boatmen shouted warnings to watch the beak - as the bird is capable of giving a very nasty nip with the hook on the tip of his bill. A couple of us found that out when we chanced to get on the receiving end of his bite. However, using the scissors accessory of Shafaat Saab's Swiss army penknife, we cut the poor chap out, noticing that his wing was badly torn and bleeding along the edges, and let him go. He slid into the water and was gone in an instant, without a single word of thanks.

Suddenly there came a loud roar from the engine. The boatmen have miraculously managed to get it going again. We engaged gears and headed for shore with all speed, just in case the engine decided to act up again. However, it seemed that the talking by the boatmen had indeed put the engine back into a good humour and, without any further trouble, it brought us safely back to the landing stage where we rejoined the secretary, who was the only member of the group who was left. The rest of the group had legged it back homeward, no doubt retreating from the fierce heat of the sun, which was considerable by now.

Cool water and delicious lunch at the EEC, topped up with the ever-refreshing tea and we were heading back home. Though there were quite some trials and tribulations on this trip, still the only word that comes to the tongue to describe this outing is - Wonderful!!!

### Footloose in the Shiwaliks - BSAP Camp to Dehra Dun - December 2005

By Sharada Annamaraju

**T**hursday, 22 Dec: We all assembled at the Secunderabad station to board the A.P express to Delhi. We were on our way to Dehradun - home to the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), the Forestry research Institute, the Indian Military Academy and much more! In the train we scanned field guides oohing and aahing at the pictures of the birds that might be seen there. We were to stay at the WII for 4 days as the guests of Mr. B.C Choudhury of the institute. At the Delhi station next morning, we saw Bank mynas. A few of them flew into the bogie vacated by us, and started

squabbling over food scraps on the floor. Birding had begun! But, there still was the journey to Dehra Dun left. We reached Dehra Dun late on the 23<sup>rd</sup> night and were put up at WII's beautiful guesthouse. We had finally arrived!

**Saturday, 24<sup>th</sup> Dec:** It was a cold morning. Dew dripped from the trees and sparkled on the grass. It was simply beautiful outside and we were raring to begin birding! We found out that most of us were late to rise, a few members of the group had already done some birding at the small lake within the campus. Not all of us got to go to the lake and had to be content with some wonderful pictures of the lake that Mr. Vikram had taken. While chatting outside and waiting for the rest of the group to come out, we were looking at the many rock pigeons around. One bird was amusingly rotating like a wind vane, atop a nearby building!

At the campus, we saw perky little white-cheeked bulbuls, small minivets, a great tit, a black headed oriole and some oriental white-eyes. Rufous tree-pies were calling from everywhere. And those who had been to the lake had seen the Slaty-headed parakeet and the white-browed fantail flycatcher in addition. Deepti and I were happily noting the features of a tall Sal tree; the ones we read about in our school geography textbooks, in long descriptions about Himalayan vegetation.

It was now time to go to Asan conservation reserve and barrage. But, before that we made a short stop at the Forestry Research Institute. Standing in front of the huge building of the headquarters, we were briefed by Mr. B.C. Choudhury about the Institute. The land on which the Institute stands today, he informed, was once a hillock. The entire area was flattened and the alluvial soil excavated was used to make bricks for the building's construction. Here we saw yellow wagtails, white wagtails, pipits, a skylark, a common Hoopoe, common babblers, common mynas, a couple of pariah kites and a single forest wagtail on a treetop.

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The first sight that greeted us at Asan Barrage was that of Brahminy ducks and cormorants basking in the sun on a pier stretching out from the crossing. Asan is a small tributary of the Yamuna. There was a female Plumbeous water redstart flying where a wall and the water's edge met. The lake had a very sizeable population of Brahminy ducks on it. Next on the roll call were Red-crested pochards. We saw Shovellers, Common coots, Gadwalls, Tufted pochards, Eurasian widgeons, a couple of Spotbilled ducks, Common pochards, a Large egret, one Little egret, a Greenshank, a Pied kingfisher, Small blue kingfisher, a Northern pintail and a single Great-crested grebe.

At the nearby forest guesthouse we met Mr. Paramjit Singh, conservator of forests, who spoke to us about how Asan reserve was formed. Asan, he informed, is the first conservation reserve in India and also the fastest formed. It has been designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) in India. Here we saw a White-capped redstart and a male Plumbeous redstart. We also saw a Pallas's fishing eagle soaring about in the sky, its broad, distinctive terminal band showing. Nearby was a 30 year-old nesting site of the eagle. At 4:30 in the

afternoon, we visited another section of the barrage. The foothills of Himachal Pradesh were visible right across the barrage. On a mudflat in the lake we saw Citrine wagtails, River Lapwings, Ringed plovers and a Redshank busily probing away in the mud. Out across, on the other end of the waters we saw two Mallards swimming peacefully against the background of tall golden grasses. And Brahminy ducks? They were everywhere!

**Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> Dec:** Merry Christmas everyone! Today we went to Haridwar. One more barrage, this time on Ganga. We birded against the spires of the temples in Haridwar. First sighting, a couple of Brahminy ducks (again!). What was that bird sitting on a tree stump in the water? Brown and big with white underbody and a stripe running through the eye? An Osprey!! We saw another Osprey at the other end of the lake later on. We saw more Mallards, Gadwalls, Crested grebes, Pintails, a Purple heron, a White-breasted waterhen and three Grey hornbills. While a few of us descended the slope to the shore, we disturbed four mongooses that made their way quickly to a more peaceful place.

In the afternoon we drove towards Rajaji national park, Chilla range. The forests were green and thick. The cars stopped in a part of the park with grasses all around and forested hillocks at a distance. Mr. Bhivas Pandav, a wildlife biologist who had earlier worked on turtle conservation and is now involved in tiger conservation, spoke to us about how the area where we were standing on was once quite degraded by the *Gujars* who lived there. The cattle they owned had over-grazed most of the grasses and in the process had also trampled over new shoots coming up. The *Gujars* felled trees and lopped branches around the settlement and had almost ruined the area. They were relocated after extensive efforts and within just three years the land had sprung back to life. Standing there under the hot, mid-day sun, it was hard to believe that the place was under any siege at all. Mr B.C. Choudhury then spoke of how important it is to encourage habitat conservation alongside species conservation.

Considering the time of the day, we didn't expect to see many birds. But we sighted the Eurasian Griffon, the Egyptian vulture, the King vulture and many Cinereous vultures. Then we saw a Crested serpent eagle, Baybacked shrike, an Indian roller, Peacocks, a Collared bush chat, lots of *cheetal* and a wild boar. A mini traffic jam later, with all the safari jeeps jostling for space on the narrow forest path, we chanced upon a Leopard. It sprinted across the path into the bushes. It stood there among the bushes on a mound of earth and looked back at us. We held our breath and gazed back at the animal. The rosettes on its coat stood out clearly. And then it slipped silently into the trees behind. We were mighty pleased for hours about the sighting! Back outside the park, while having lunch, we heard Alexandrine parakeets calling.

**Monday, 26<sup>th</sup> Dec:** Crows cawing all about and mobbing a Changeable Hawk eagle. The bird zoomed off into the trees trying to escape the annoying crows. You could say 26<sup>th</sup> was raptor day, because all the bird species we saw, except one, were so. We visited Mussoorie and Dhanaulti today. Would we bump into Ruskin bond, the famous author, at Mall road? Would we see snow? A Lammergeier? The uphill climb began

and our cars slowly wound their way up the roads. The hillside plunged deeper every few hundred feet. The vegetation also changed to alpine trees all around. Halfway to Dhanaulti, Mr Shafaat Ulla spotted a Black bulbul. The first smattering of snow started appearing. As we gained altitude, we saw more snow around on the terraced slopes. We couldn't hold ourselves anymore and got out of the cars, and had a big snow-fight! Our hands went numb and tingled after we handled the snow! The path to Dhanaulti was clothed in white. In the horizon the Himalayan range stretched out from extreme left to extreme right. On the way back to Mussoorie, the 'Raptor flight festival' took place! A Black eagle, a Griffon and quite a few Cinereous vultures were soaring about. On the hills below, a troop of Langurs sat sunning themselves. The Cinereous gave us a beautiful view, soaring right above us. As the day darkened we shopped at Mussoorie's Mall road. Then we wound our way back to Dehra Dun, the town lights and the stars blinking back at us against the dark skies.

**Tuesday, 27<sup>th</sup> Dec:** We were invited for breakfast at Mr. Choudhury's house. The Flamebacked woodpeckers that visit their house everyday were there on the window ledge feeding on rice. Outside the house we saw rosefinches (? species), Himalayan treepie, Magpie robin and a Jungle owl. Next we went birding in the forests near the Wildlife Institute. The forests happen to be the southern part of Chilla range. The forest was pretty silent. Mr. Jaipal from the WII told us to keep our eyes and ears open for mixed hunting parties. That would be the best way to see many birds. Sure enough, we came across two hunting parties on the way. We plunged into the undergrowth towards the direction of the calls. The party was winging its way to us. First came Oriental white eyes. Then we saw a Large cuckoo-shrike, a Flame-backed and a Grey-headed woodpecker. In the second party, we were surrounded with Chestnut-bellied nuthatches, Yellow-naped, Fulvous breasted and Pygmy woodpeckers, a Black-headed oriole, Long-tailed minivets and a Grey headed flycatcher (*Culicicapa ceylonensis*). We had our binoculars gummed to our eyes and had our heads craned back to look at the birds. Other birds seen in between the two parties were a Red-billed blue magpie, a Small niltava (very rare in the area apparently), Yellow-bellied flycatcher, Greyhooded warbler, a Bar-tailed treecreeper and Black drongo. In the evening we attended a powerpoint presentation at the Zoological Survey of India where the topics of Asan barrage reserve and bird flu were discussed.

We wish we had seen more Himalayan birds. A few of us weren't ready to leave Dehra Dun and come back to Hyderabad! Deepti and I went around bidding goodbye to everything, from the rooms to the potted plants to the doormat in front of the guest-house at the WII! Dehra Dun has so much in it to explore. There is something about the Himalayas which makes you want to go back and visit them again. We'll be back!

**Wednesday, 28<sup>th</sup> Dec:** After an overnight journey from Dehradun, we arrived at New Delhi. The group split into two, one went shopping and the other for more birding. We hired a taxi and drove to Okhla, passing through the centre of Delhi. A bit of sightseeing was done from the taxi itself. Pragati maidan, the world trade centre, Lodhi gardens and



Akshardham. At Okhla we saw Red wattled lapwing, Tallorbird, Pied mynas, Rufous backed shrike, Pied bush chat, Red munias, Yellow bellied prinia, Ashy prinia, Plain prinia, Little brown dove, Common stonechat, Blackwinged stilts, Silverbills, River terns, Wire-tailed swallows, Black tailed godwits, Black and Brownheaded gulls, Avocets, Large cormorants, Black necked grebe, Green bee-eaters, Red-

vented bulbuls, Flamingos and phew!!! a mass of Greylag geese. Later we went to Janpath for shopping and lunch.

Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> Dec: Back in Hyderabad after 5 days of birding and lots of fun. All good camps must come to an end. But, there is always the next BSAP camp to look forward to!

## Jerdon's Courser Habitat Under Threat

By P. Jeganathan

In the November 2005 (Vol.2, No.11) issue of *Pitta* our editors asked why our members are hesitant to submit articles. After reading that, I was thinking about writing some interesting observations of the birds of Sri Lankamalleswara Wildlife Sanctuary (SLWLS), Cuddapah District. But, now I would like to brief the members about the recent catastrophe that has taken place in and around the SLWLS.

The Jerdon's Courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*) doesn't need any introduction, especially for our members. We consider this beautiful bird as the "Pride of Andhra Pradesh". It was rediscovered in 1986 and till 2000 its known distribution was a single site a few hundred metres in diameter in scrub jungle near Reddipalli in the Sagileru River valley. Recent research conducted by Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) along with Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Universities of Reading and Cambridge, funded by Darwin Initiative, UK has located their presence in three new sites in and around SLWLS. All these are all within 14 km of the original rediscovery site.



We received permission from the A.P. Forest Department to carry out radio-telemetry studies recently. I was in SLWLS in October 2005 to accomplish this task. But what we found near the sanctuary was very disturbing. The Telugu-Ganga Canal was being constructed around the eastern part of SLWLS. Timely warning given by BNHS and prompt action taken by the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department (APFD) resulted in stopping this canal work for the time being.

Most of you might aware be that at the time of the rediscovery of the Jerdon's Courser, this site was under threat by this canal construction. Officials from the APFD and State Government of Andhra Pradesh recognized the ornithological importance of the site and declared it as the Sri Lankamalleswara Wildlife Sanctuary and caused the proposed course of the canal to be adjusted to avoid the Sanctuary. It should be noted that the late Sri. Pushp Kumar who was the Additional Chief Conservator in Charge of Wildlife during that period had played a pivotal role in conserving this bird and its habitat. In fact he had visited the rediscovery site along with Dr. Salim Ali. I did not know him personally but I met him briefly when we had conducted the workshop on the Jerdon's Courser in Hyderabad in January 2003. He was also a member of National Wildlife Action Plan 2002-2016.

This action plan suggests that suitable alternative homes should be identified for single isolated populations of species such as the Jerdon's Courser and to manage those sites as Protected Areas effectively. While we are grieving on the sad demise of Sri Pushp Kumar we need to grieve for the Jerdon's Courser and its habitat as well. Because nearly 22 ha of suitable habitat of the Jerdon's Courser was destroyed due to the canal construction including one of the sites where the Jerdon's Courser was reported in 2001. Apart from this the proposed canal route goes very close to the rediscovery site of the Jerdon's Courser. This is the only place in the world at the moment where these birds are known to be present at almost all the time. It is estimated that if the proposed canal progresses any further it will destroy c.50 ha of suitable habitat of the Jerdon's Courser around the Sri Lankamalleswara Wildlife Sanctuary.

A more detailed report on the Impact of the Telugu-Ganga Canal on the Jerdon's Courser habitat can be downloaded from the BNHS website [www.bnhs.org](http://www.bnhs.org).

It is quite obvious that the Jerdon's Courser needs a lot more support than it is getting at the moment. I urge all our members to write to the State and Central Governments about this issue and make a strong case for protection of the habitat of this unique bird. Some of our members have already voiced their concerns over this issue, and we need many more like them. Apart from that please ask your naturalist friends and likeminded organizations to do so too. In case these organizations are not aware of the canal issue they can visit the BNHS website to get more details. We need to protect our pride for ever.

## Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

**T**he last month, we studied the habits of members of the Pigeon family. This month, we will continue the good work and take a look at another bird of the pigeon tribe. A half-dozen of these chaps have taken to putting in an appearance on the balcony these days and they do much to improve the appearance of the apartment. The first time I saw one I was not overly pleased as he took it into his head to perch on the clothesline and, having done so, he immediately proceeded to compel me to do the washing again! Nevertheless, these peccadilloes apart, the Spotted Dove is a charming chap to have on the balcony - when he is not perching on the clothesline, that is!

In older days, the only real use for these birds was for the table. They were termed delicious eating by those adults that had experience in such matters. What is more, I have eaten a lot of them in my time, and I can myself testify that they make a most delicious curry, especially if we take the trouble of par-boiling them first before introducing them into the sauce! Of course, let me hasten to add (before the Editors decide to banish my dangerous views on this subject...), that was a long time ago and I haven't put any of the balcony visitors to uses other than as visitors. One does not eat visitors - even if they mess up the washing.

The Spotted Dove is a most simple bird. It appears to have a supreme ability to get itself into trouble at the least opportunity. You do not believe me - get one inside a room, attempt to make it go out and then come back to talk to me! I spent a whole morning getting very hot, very exhausted, and very annoyed at one that took it into its head to come into the room. Naturally we had to switch off the fan to prevent it from getting chopped up. But the chap showed no signs of leaving. He flew from window ledge to cupboard to chair to television to bookshelf and generally almost everywhere except out the door or the window. Eventually, just when I was thinking of breaking the not-eating-visitors-rule, he decided that he had overstayed his welcome and, with a very smug expression on his face, potted out of the door and flew off leisurely - leaving behind a very hot and annoyed host.

In the matter of housing also, this chap has the most primitive ideas. A few twigs precariously balanced on some scrubby little tree - that is the average Spotted Dove's idea of a nest. How there are any Doves left is a mystery to me. The slightest wind causes the nest to sway alarmingly and, like as not, the eggs come tumbling down and are rapidly set upon by ants and that's the end of that particular family. Nothing daunted, the adults find some more twigs, string them up as before and repeat the entire performance. One particular pair that I studied made **seven** attempts at building a nest at the exact same place, with identical results. Every time the tree swayed, down came the nest, complete with eggs, chicks or whatever happened to be in it at the time. Finally, thoroughly exasperated, I furnished them with a very solid nest myself and the birds finally managed to get their family raised - much to my relief!

The one thing very passable about this chap is the colouring. I know we had earlier decided that we won't go into plumages in these columns, but this one time I shall break the rule slightly and say a few words on the very pretty checkerboard pattern on the neck of these birds. It has been said that, when King Solomon was holding court, the doves were much plainer dressed than they are now. One such chap, greatly impressed with the chessboard laid out in the great king's rooms, expressed a great desire to have his feathers coloured in similar fashion. The king obliged to the extent that the chessboard pattern was permanently inscribed on the bird's neck. And since that day, all Spotted Doves have sported this very becoming chessboard on their necks. A very interesting tale this - a friend of mine told it me. He also added some rather hard-to-believe stories that the fleas in the feathers of the bird use this board to play chess with, but I rather think that, in this matter, he was pulling my leg!

There was a time when I was much interested in falconry and had trained several interesting birds of prey to hunt. One of these was a Turumti - and the selected prey was doves. Though the Little Brown Doves were quite clever at avoiding falcons as a general rule, the Spotted Doves were quite another matter. I swear that there were occasions when the birds just sat there and gaped as the falcon swooped in and simply lifted one from wherever it was perched. They seemed even incapable of defending themselves through flight. And it again sets me a-thinking as to how these birds even survive to maturity. Yet they do and are generally always to be seen around gardens, parks and the balcony!

A few days ago I was watching one of these birds scrabbling over a bare bit of ground. As it happened, the plot opposite the apartments has been recently cleared (no doubt for the building of further apartment blocks), and the ground is now as bare of vegetation as an egg. But there were two Spotted Doves hurriedly pecking away at the ground as though there was something rare and refreshing on it. I hurried inside for my binoculars and stared at what the birds were doing. It took me about ten minutes to realise that there was a positive feast going on - and the table had been laid with ants. The Doves had managed to find a marching column of small black ants and were having the time of their lives. The ants on the other hand, quite obviously were having a very bad time indeed. But they seemed to have no idea how to retaliate and the upshot was that the doves continued their orgy unabashedly. Having gorged themselves upon the unfortunate insects, they then, for good measure, pecked up a few grains of grit, flew to the balcony for a drink of water and flew off thoroughly satisfied birds, I am sure.

A friend of mine had a large cage in his garden that had originally been built to house some partridge and quail. Unfortunately, there happened to be a gap somewhere in the wire and a couple of Spotted Doves discovered this. They also discovered that there was a liberal supply of grain in the cage, provided for the benefit of the said partridge and quail. However, the doves decided that this banquet had been

provided for their express benefit and they moved in. Not only that, they settled down in this cage, found a scrubby little shrub, found some flimsy twigs and built their apologetic nest. Since the cage happened to be in a sheltered spot, there was no wind to play spoilsport with their nest and they were able to raise their olive branches. It got so out of hand that soon my friend was literally going all over the place asking people to come and take some doves from him. I got a couple of pairs myself – and since this was in the old days when these birds regularly featured on the menu, we prepared rather a dainty curry from these chaps. Very delicious they were, too.

Those old days are long gone now and I no longer go out of my way to eat these birds. Which is no, to say that others also think like me. The chowk bird market generally has several of these unfortunates, awaiting the cooking pot. I sometimes amuse myself by buying a couple and letting them go into more conducive habitats than the rather grubby cages they are crammed into. But I gave that up after one that I had released compelled me to do my washing again! Which brings us back to the fact that a few doves on the balcony generally bring much cheer. So spend some time this month looking at Spotted Doves – even those that ensure no rest to the washing machine. Until next month – happy birding!!

## P.K. – Soaring High in the Sky

*By Siraj A. Taher*

Time: About 10.00 A.M. on a cold and blustering morning.

Date: 18<sup>th</sup> January 1980

Place: The Curator's Office – Nehru Zoological Park, Mir Alam

There was a small group of enthusiastic and motivated people mostly from the A.P. Agricultural College, some from the Veterinary College and a few vagrants from other walks of life.

A shortish man in a light brown safari suit, very energetic and purposeful, was in full control of the meeting and seemed excited. This was Pushp Kumar (P.K. or Mr. P.K. to his many colleagues in the Forest Office and to most of us in the Birdwatchers Society).

The reason for this meeting was the formation of what was then to be known as the Birdwatchers Club of Andhra Pradesh, subsequently called the Birdwatchers Society of A.P. (BSAP). From that day onwards, till 1992, P.K. was the President (and chief navigator) of the Society, steering it in its formative and growing years. His association, guidance and help was the main reason for the phenomenal growth of the society and its recognition all over the country.

For the field outings of the Society, P.K. would be punctually present on the Sunday morning at Kothi, where several other members would be already waiting. As his white ambassador stopped by the pavement, P.K. would get down, attired in his brown safari suit and the ever-present brown Golf cap. Most of the outings would start from Kothi punctually at 7.30 a.m. and we would return by the afternoon. For almost all the outings, perfect arrangements would have been made by the Forest Department and someone or other would be present at the venue. At most of these outings, Mr. K. Varaprasad, then Forest Range Officer always accompanied the group.

For the indoor meetings, which till P.K.'s retirement always took place in the Forest Department, an area was specially done up for this purpose and Pushp Kumar took great pains to see that all arrangements were perfect and so the programmes were always well attended and purposeful. As P.K. got his promotions in his job, BSAP also improved its contacts in the department, and also grew in stature. This relationship became so good that for most of us, the

department was a second home and one could get any legitimate wildlife or conservation work done in next to no time, thanks to our President. Besides his own office, most of us from the Society could just knock and enter any officers' room whenever we needed. Where else and how many could claim such privileges. This contact and relationship still survives between some of the officers whose tenure continues and the Society members. The height of P.K.'s involvement with the Society was the National Seminar on Bird Conservation, organised in Hyderabad in 1980. This was a very well attended event and is a feather in the cap for the BSAP.

Most, if not all of us, benefited greatly from P.K.'s knowledge of birds of this region. His motivation and sincerity in all types of wildlife and conservation works spurred us on to learn more and more. Today if I can claim to know something of birds, and have friends working with various bird organisations in the country and abroad, a great part of the credit must go to this simple, honest and knowledgeable man, who was then an important part of the wildlife scene in A.P. and India. He was well recognised and accepted as an authority on the subject, especially establishment of Zoo's and their management.

Every one of us have shortcomings, and Pushp Kumar had his. I would have stand-offs with him but never even once would he let such occasions mar the real purpose of our relationships. He was an honest, simple and deeply motivated person, totally involved with wildlife conservation and management in A.P. particularly and India in general. He led a frugal life with no airs about him and had a dry sense of humour – There are 3 terns flying over Hussain Sagar lake; he would suddenly say – "Those two are River Terns, and the one going the other way is a LEFT TERN" –.

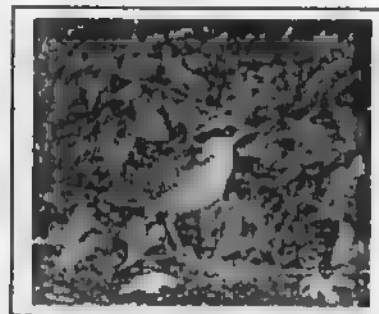
I shall miss him greatly and remember all the motivation he instilled in me and in several others. The process of learning was such a serious business with him, but he made it look so simple and such great fun. Even now I feel that there is this man, dressed in his brown safari and the ever-present brown golf cap amongst the birds, soaring high in the sky, watching all of us.



## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### THE INDIAN PITTA (*Pitta brachyura*)

**T**he Indian Pitta (*Pitta brachyura*) is called *Navrang* in hindi, and very apt the name is too, since it is an extremely colourful bird. The body plumage generally verges on fulvous or light fawn. But interspersed are little touches of greens and blues, blacks and whites and a very bright crimson patch under the very stubby tail. It is found commonly in wooded areas but has been known to enter well-wooded gardens in the heart of the city also. On a lighter note, it can also be seen on the BSAP letterhead and on the top of this newsletter!



The bird is a distant cousin of the thrushes and displays several characteristics of the ground thrushes. It is a very secretive bird and is generally seen in undergrowth in scrub jungle or on dry stream beds that have a thick carpet of dead leaves, through which it forages for its sustenance. Occasionally, two or three birds will be found in the same spot, calling out to each other as though carrying on a conversation.

By and large, the birds are very secretive and usually slight glimpses before the bird flushes are about the best sighting. Occasionally however, if seen foraging amongst the carpet of dead leaves on the forest floor, if the bird is not unduly aware of our presence, a very decent sighting can be had – and the bird is well worth looking at. It is not easy to mistake it for anything else. No other bird in the region is so generally colourful, though confusion is possible with the Whitethroated Ground Thrush, which is found in similar habitats and has the general fawn coloured body plumage and is also secretive in nature. In nature the Pitta is mainly a terrestrial bird, preferring to roost in trees. In wooded country or in dry nullah beds or ravines with tangled undergrowth it is generally seen hopping around, turning over the dead leaves and digging into damp earth for insects and grubs which are its main food.

The nesting season is thought to be from around May to August, though it is likely that the birds do not breed here in the Hyderabad region, which seems to be a stopover on their main migration route. There is local movement of these birds from the northern regions, where it is occasionally seen as high up as 1200 m in the Himalayas. The local migration is thought to be mainly influenced by the South-West monsoons. The nest is made up of twigs, grasses and roots and is sometimes on the ground under a bush but more often in the fork of a small tree. Four to six eggs are laid, which are shiny white in colour with spots and specks of dark purple. It is thought that both sexes share in the domestic chores.

The main threat to these birds is generally habitat degradation, since our carefully manicured gardens and lawns are not suitable to the species. It is imperative to provide protection to low riverine forests which hold a suitable habitat of low scrub bushes and tangled undergrowth, which supports this species. Apart from this, there is an occasional demand as cage birds, on account of their colourful plumage, though the birds are very difficult to keep in captivity, due to their specialised food – which cannot be easily reproduced for the cages. There were a couple of occasions when we found this species in the bird market in Hyderabad and obtained them for small sums. Trying to keep them in captivity was a failure as the birds refused to eat and they had to be released back into the wild. It may be possible to keep them in captivity if a suitable enclosure can be made, to emulate the forest floor which is their chosen habitat. However, given the precarious position of the populations of this bird, it may be as well to refrain from any such experimentation. The birds do need protection, and it is high time we gave them some.

A mega Enviro Mela is being organized by the Society to Save Rocks on Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> February 2006 at National Institute of Tourism and Hospitality Management (N.I.T.H.M.), Gachibowli. This will be a day long event starting from 11 A.M. to 8 P.M. Several organizations related to nature are participating in this Mela. The BSAP also is a participant. Active birders, who wish to volunteer, kindly give your names to the Secretary or Sri Shafaat Ulla. Volunteers are required to sit for long hours in the stall, to sell the goods and to explain about our society to visitors.. Early in the morning at 6.30 A.M. there will be a bird watching tour at K.B.R. Park. Our volunteers will explain about birds to members of Save Rocks society. Those who wish to volunteer for bird watching, please give your names to the Secretary or Sri Shafaat Ulla.

#### For Private Circulation Only

For information, write to: Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India.

Editors: Siraj A. Taher, Humayun Taher.

Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: [baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk), [humayun.taher@gmail.com](mailto:humayun.taher@gmail.com)

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Field Outings

*26<sup>th</sup>*  
**Sunday, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2006: K.B.R. Park, Jubilee Hills** – Route: From Panjagutta, take Road Number 3, past L.V. Prasad Eye Institute and continue to the Park on the left hand side of the road, and assemble at the gates by 6.45 A.M. The park is noted for ground birds and Peafowl are very numerous in the area. There may be sightings of Grey and Painted Partridge also, though the stray dogs have reduced their numbers somewhat. The lake in the park is good for Spotbills and Whistling Teals and these should be about. Mostly scrubland birds like Bulbuls, Robins and warblers. Ashy Swallow-Shrikes are generally present and could be seen. Further bonuses may be the Sparrowhawk that used to live in the acacia thickets on the western side of the park. This will be a short half-day trip. Carry water and snacks.

For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3093 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

**Indoor Meeting**

There will be no Indoor meeting in March.

## NEWS & NOTES

### Field Trip of the Society to ICRISAT Campus 26<sup>th</sup> February 2006

Over the years, this venue has been one of the most rewarding birding experiences. Totals of over a hundred species have been listed, and some extremely interesting sightings have been made in this campus. So the members that turned up for the outing today were hoping that ICRISAT would run true to form and provide us with interesting sightings. As it turned out, well you shall read on and judge for yourself.

We started out from Punjagutta almost on time – only about 15 minutes behind schedule at around 6.45, reaching the destination at around 7.30. A bus, organised by BSAP member Tom Hash of ICRISAT, was waiting for us at the gate. Also waiting were quite a fair number of other BSAP members who had got there before us. After exchanging greetings, and being received by Mr. Hugo of ICRISAT, we explained the basic route to the bus driver and so off to the first of our birding spots, the Campus Lakes.

Arriving at this spot, we were in for a surprise. Prepared to see large rafts of ducks in attendance, we were sadly

disappointed for all that could be seen of the duck clan were a few common Spotbills interspersed with a single pair of Garganey Teals. Where, we wondered, were the huge rafts of Common and Redcrested Pochards that were once a prominent feature of the place. However, realising that this was considerably late in the season (end February), there was nothing to do but to take what nature offered and continue birding. If there were no ducks, doubtless there would be other interesting birds around. So it proved – for we very quickly notched up Collared Bush Chats, Honey Buzzard, Purple Moorhens and, most interesting, a Blüethroat. There were also a couple of Pipits, both the Tawny and Paddyfield varieties, and also a solitary Rufoustailed Finch Lark. White Ibis flew past overhead and a Blackwinged Kite was spotted.

This seemed to complete all that the Campus Lakes had to offer so, without further ado, we climbed back into the bus and requested the driver to



take the route past the Patancheru lake, that lies just outside the campus and can be seen through the fencing. Just before reaching the spot, we spotted a Grey Partridge on the road – accompanied by a half-dozen tiny young. The chicks could not have been long out of the eggs, or so they appeared. Looking rather like outsize bumble-bees, the youngsters presented a very quaint picture as they tumbled over each other on the dirt track. The precociousness of the mother was very interesting for she kept appearing on the track every couple of seconds to herd the youngsters into the long grass beside the track, and also keeping a very watchful eye on the bus. We refrained from getting down to take pictures, as it would have disturbed the bird extremely. While all this drama was going on, Shafaat Saab was scanning the lake with the binoculars but noticed nothing interesting save a couple of cormorants, coots and a solitary darter circling overhead. So we decided to skip this lake and push on to the ICRISAT lake, which is generally rewarding.

Rewarding, we decided at first glance, did not even begin to describe the position. The lake was swarming with ducks. We put down a rough estimate of between 5000 to 7000 birds. The majority of these were Shovelers, but there was a sprinkling of Lesser Whistling Teal, a few Garganey and some Common Teal also. In the foreground, in a patch of grass was a goodish flock of Ruff, and there were other waders around too; a Blacktailed Godwit and a few Common Sandpipers. An Openbill Stork stood nearby, staring pensively over its absurd bill into the water. Fish; he seemed to be saying – nonsense; where have the clamshells got to!

We now decided that there was no better time or place for breakfast – so the picnic boxes came out and a decent spread soon appeared on the board. Munching sandwiches, and other delicacies, we lazily peered up into the shady trees in search of more feathered friends. A feathered fiend soon appeared, in the shape of a very diminutive little warbler of some sort. We looked at it through the naked, and then with the glasses and then some more without the glasses and eventually, thoroughly exasperated, we wrote it off as just another of those LBJ's and let it go at that.

Meanwhile, Shafaat Saab and a few others started discussing the possibilities of a weekend trip to Uppalapadu to see the Pelicans nesting there. However, we decided that at such a place as ICRISAT, it does not do to divert our minds by talks of Pelicans. True enough, we had hardly decided to concentrate on what is around when we saw the first of the big raptors. An eagle was soaring above us, followed soon enough by another. Raajeev, the raptor specialist was consulted in this matter – he gazed long and hard, for eagles in flight are no easy matter to identify, and then informed us that the pair were Greater Spotted Eagles. As with all eagles, it was a combination of a couple of tiny little points that combined to make up the certainty of the id. We will be content with that.

The food has almost disappeared, so the birders think to betake themselves to the next spot – the Red Lakes where there is a sizeable heronry and some nesting Storks and Cormorants. Accordingly, pausing only to photograph a young Monitor Lizard that was so incautious as to poke its head out

of a hole in a nearby tree just as the secretary, Mr. Bhaskara Rao was staring at the hole; we climbed back into the bus and headed out to the Red Lakes.

These gave us a great many new and interesting birds. Foremost were the breeding Painted and Openbilled Storks. Then there were quite a few ducks also. While the majority were again the Shovelers, there was a sprinkling of sharp-tailed Pintails around and a few high-caste Brahminy Ducks that preferred to keep to themselves rather than mingle with the throng. A couple of Lesser Whistling Teal also, and some Common Teal hidden in the bushes on the islands. And waders – Spotted and Common Redshanks, a Green Sandpiper, a Little Ringed Plover, his snub nose showing nicely. Then there were a few Blackwinged Stilts to round it off. A Parakeet poked its head out of a palm tree; counting up from the bottom, he was on the fifth floor of a ten-storey parakeet-nesting tree.

From here on, it was a straight run back to the gate and to the cars and so back to the city. A total of 75 species had been sighted and all had a wonderful time. ICRISAT again had proved itself to be just as good as it always is!

### Conservation Issues at Kokrebellur – Talk by Shri K. Manu of Mysore Amateur Naturalists.

By Sharad Murdeshwar

**B**irders in India and especially those from the south might have heard of the village of Kokrebellur [Latitude 12.526° N, Longitude 77.085° E] in Karnataka. This village situated in Maddur taluka of Mandya district, around 80 kms from Bangalore and 45 kms from Mysore, between Channarayana and Maddur on the Mysore Road, shot to prominence years ago, when the national press covered the 'unusual' relationship of migrant water birds and the villagers of Kokrebellur. Pelicans, especially Spot-billed Pelicans [*Pelicanus philippensis*], Painted Storks [*Mycteria leucocephala*] and waterfowl, driven by the instinct to migrate with the change of seasons, have turned up at the village for centuries, attracted by its rich water bodies and the safe refuge they find on the tall village trees, to breed and nest. The villagers have welcomed these winged visitors each year and this relationship caught the imagination of people everywhere.

The BSAP had invited members for a talk on Pelicans on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> February 2006, by Shri K. Manu of the Mysore Amateur Naturalists (MAN), who has been working on conservation at Kokrebellur for many years. Around 20 members turned up for this meeting. After introductions, Shri K. Manu began with a brief, yet interesting prelude on the need for conservation. He used a set of slides and put across his point through an account of some of India's endangered species, which have been affected by dwindling habitats and poaching. The Nilgiri Tahr [*Hemitragus hylocreus*] of southern India, whose closest relatives are to be found in the Himalayas and is separated from them by thousands of kilometres, he said, is probably a relic from the times when the Indian peninsula was covered by glacial ice of the Ice Ages, and



whose ancestors in the south moved to the cooler heights of the Western Ghats complex as the ice retreated. The Nilgiri Tahr is literally on the edge of a dangerous precipice, as a species. Only a thousand odd Nilgiri Tahr survive today in relatively small patches of hills in the higher altitudes of the Western Ghats, where another endangered species, the Lion-tailed Macaque [*Macaca silenus*] is found in evergreen and semi-evergreen broadleaf monsoon forests. The *shola* forests and grasslands that have supported many endemic species in this ecologically rich and sensitive region have been threatened by the growth of tea, coffee and cardamom plantations since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Asian Elephant [*Elephas maximus*] whose three sub-species are found in India, is adored throughout India, yet ironically is in danger from poaching and habitat destruction that has cut off traditional migration routes. Manu said that the ratio of male to female elephants has gone down so badly, that in parts of the country, there is one bull to every 300 female elephants and this has raised a question mark on the future of the species. The Royal Bengal Tiger [*Panthera tigris tigris*], the Leopard [*Panthera pardus fusca*] and other wildlife face similar problems throughout the sub-continent.

After this introduction Manu began his talk on Pelicans and Painted Storks and the problems they face at Kokrebellur. The name of the village is thought to have been derived from *Kokkare* meaning stork in the local language Kannada, and *Bellur* meaning 'village of jaggery' (unrefined sugar derived from sugarcane). Mandya district is known for its sugarcane fields. Manu explained he had come to Kokrebellur on a visit many years ago as a birder, drawn by its fame and eventually realised that in order to understand the birds and their relationship with the villagers better, he needed to stay back and work there. He gradually learnt from his experiences and gathered more insights by staying there, which, he felt would have not been the case even if he had been a frequent visitor. It was in those years that Manu started the Mysore Amateur Naturalists (MAN) with a few friends.



Manu said that the pelicans start arriving at Kokrebellur sometime by mid-November when the villagers have finished harvesting and threshing their crop. In fact the villagers try to ensure that they are done with harvesting before the first birds wing their way to their village. Manu said that on arrival, the male pelicans sit on the top of trees, not bothered by other males close by and invite females passing overhead by calling out at them. This behaviour of the pelicans is quite unlike the storks, which squabble with a neighbour of the same species that dares come too close. When a female pelican settles down on the tree-top, she is wooed by the bachelors who try to get her attention. She takes her time and later chooses one suitor. She confirms her choice by accepting a twig given to her by the male, from trees whose leaves bear a good number of oil glands. The significance of choosing twigs of such trees was explained later by Manu.

After the pair has bonded and mated, nest building starts in earnest. The nests of neighbouring pelicans can be quite close unlike the aloof Painted Storks, which keep a distance between their nest and those of their neighbours. The eggs are soon laid and the onerous duty of incubating them begins. While incubating the eggs, the pelican needs to sit at the spot for hours together and for days on end, and during this period of inactivity, the heat from the hot overhead sun forces ticks and other parasites to move to the lower portion of the bird's body and especially to the area of the brood patch where the skin is exposed. If proper care is not taken, these parasites can harm the parent and its chicks. The use of twigs of trees with relatively larger number of oil glands in their leaves as nest material now proves useful in keeping the ticks away from the brood patch. Nesting pelicans use their Gular Pouch or the Gular Sac for panting, to lower their body temperature. The Painted Storks have blood vessels running close to the surface of their legs and so they defecate on the legs to cool them, thereby lowering their body temperature.

By January end, mid-February, when the pelican hatchlings are vying for partially digested fish from their parents, the Painted Storks begin arriving and start nest building at Kokrebellur. This staggering of nesting between the two species has much to do with availability of suitable foraging conditions. Pelicans fish in deep waters and haul 3-4 kgs of big fish in a day and so they stand a better chance of being able to feed their young ones by starting breeding early, soon after the monsoons. The Painted Stork forages by wading at the waters edge of mudflats and marshes, which become plentiful by February or March when it is hotter. They stir the mud to drive fish, frog and other small creatures their way. The pelicans herd fish by swimming together in semi-circular formation. The ones at the centre get to grab fish in their pouches after the ones at the edges have herded them to the centre. The ones at the edges then also get their turn at the centre, and so to feed. The storks and the pelicans occupy two different ecological niches and so tolerate each other.

The villagers of Kokrebellur believe that the arrival of the pelicans and the storks bodes well for the village as they bring with them an assurance that the rains will not play truant in the coming months. Whenever there is a drought in that area, the birds do not come to Kokrebellur and the villagers, as did their ancestors before them, took that to be an ill-omen and so welcomed the birds to their village. Manu said that it is this age-old belief that has helped these birds and he said it was ironical that educating the villagers on the real reason may not really help the birds case!

Manu said that in his initial years at Kokrebellur he was distraught that every year a large number of hatchlings fall down from their nests. Pelican nests being close to those of their neighbours, the chicks jostle to get at the regurgitated fish brought by their parents and neighbours and in the process some of them fall down from the nests. Some die from the fall, others fall prey to village dogs and cats. He decided early on that he should act to save and rehabilitate these chicks. Manu got some of the village children together and took their help in locating such chicks and bringing them to a care centre that he formed in the village. A local youth was employed to feed the chicks and take care of them till

they were big enough to fend for themselves. This programme- which continues to the day, has saved a sizeable number of pelican and stork chicks from certain death over the years. The MAN has built a fish pond in the village, which is stocked with fish for the birds. The fish pond has reduced the cost of operations by a great degree. MAN regularly organises camps for teachers and school students at a very low cost. Teachers and children stay at the camp for 5 days and learn first hand about nature and conservation. These camps and donations bring MAN the funds that it needs for its operations.

Manu said that the Pelican and Painted Stork face greater dangers than those arising from falling chicks. Development and changing social practises in the villages portend bad times for the birds at Kokrebellur. The MAN had shown the villagers how they could collect guano from the base of trees on which birds nest, mix them with the soil from tank beds and use them as fertiliser. This gift from the birds had earned them the gratitude of the villagers. However with chemical fertilisers now being easily available on credit, many farmers prefer them over the labour-intensive method of collecting guano. Villagers also increasingly lease their trees to contractors who prune trees and collect leaves for fodder- disregarding the presence of nests on these trees. Similarly the demand for brick and mortar houses has led to more brick kilns operating in the villages nearby, which have started using wood from local trees for fuel, affecting nesting badly. Unlike the past, marriages are held more ostentatiously in the countryside and the waste that follows these events attracts scavengers like crows whose population has subsequently increased in Kokrebellur. When there isn't enough waste to scavenge, the crows attack nestlings.

Manu bemoaned the fact that after Kokrebellur was selected as a centre for promoting rural tourism the problems have compounded. The tourism department spent lakhs of rupees to beautify the village and to build *nallas*, but in the process axed down many big trees without being bothered about the birds! The Forest Department has numbered trees to ensure that they are not cut but sometimes the high-handedness of the officials alienates the villagers. One year, after some villagers were troubled by the officials, the villagers put up sheets over all tall trees saying they would not let the birds nest that year and it was only after much cajoling that they backed off.

Manu ended his talk saying that inspite of all the efforts that his organisation and others are making, he sees a grim future for these birds. He said, by some estimates, there are only around 12,000 Spot-billed Pelicans left in the wild today. Their numbers are drastically down from the millions that once sailed gracefully in ponds and lakes across South-east Asia and the Far East.

The story of the pelicans and storks at Kokrebellur is being repeated in many villages and towns across the world. The cast and situations maybe different but the story is depressingly familiar. It takes determined, yet unassuming people like Manu and his friends at MAN to make that

difference. People who cannot wait and watch, but who would rather act and do all they can to prevent a world from disappearing before them.

## BSAP At The EnviroMela

By T. Vijayendra

**T**o celebrate its tenth anniversary the Society to Save Rocks (SSR) organised an Enviro-Mela on February 19, 2006. The Mela brought several environmental and nature organisation together. These included, The Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh (BSAP), WWF of AP, Friends of Snake Club, Cerana Foundation, Nori Art and Puppetry Centre, Blue Cross, Kids for Tigers, Centre for Environment Education AP, Civic Exnora, A. P. Pollution Control Board, A.P. Forest Department and others.

The day began at 6:30 a.m. with the BSAP organising a birdwatching walk at the KBR Park. On its part the Society to Save Rocks presented each participant of the walk with a sunshade with BSAP and SSR logos and 'Enviro-Mela 19 Feb, 2006' printed on it. The BSAP was represented by its Secretary Mr. C. Bhaskar Rao, Aasheesh Pittie, Shafaat Ulla and Arjun. T. Vijayendra (who is also our life member) represented the Rock Society. Manu K. from Mysore Amateur Naturalists was also present.

It was a very successful walk with about 34 participants and lasted for two hours. Three of the participants joined the walk without knowing about it previously. The walk began with T. Vijayendra welcoming the participants and giving a brief talk about the background of the Mela. Mr. Shafaat Ulla gave a talk about BSAP. Aasheesh and Manu interacted with the participants, particularly with the young ones, answering many queries and explaining things in nature. For most of the participants it was their first birdwatching trip and so they were very excited and it was a good exposure for BSAP.

At the Mela at the National Institute of Tourism and Hospitality Management (NITHM) BSAP had a stall which was manned by C. Bhaskar Rao, Shafaat Ulla and Arjun. They gave information about the Society, gave out brochures and sold T-Shirts and caps. They succeeded in getting two life memberships and five annual memberships. They also sold about 10 T-Shirts and caps.

Several other events at the Mela were also highly successful. These included the Rock Walks, the Snake Shows, plays by Oxford Grammar School and NASR School, Puppet Play 'The Giving Tree' by NORI and the feature film, 'Summer of the Falcon'. Origami also drew lot of children. Blue Cross with its puppies also was a major attraction.

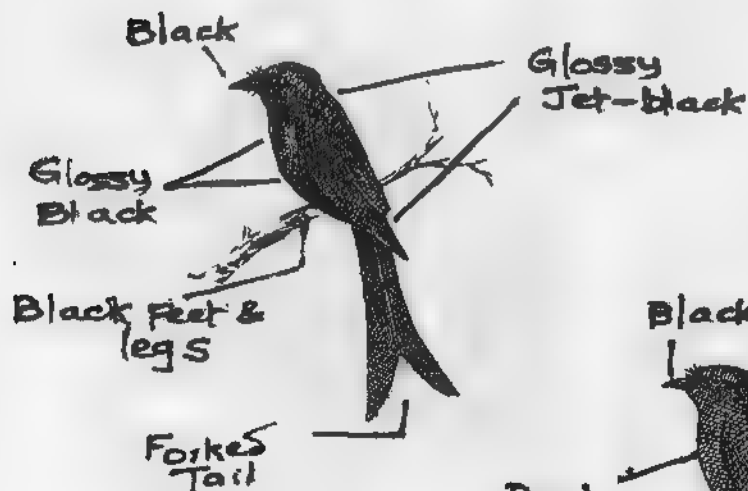
The Society to Save Rocks and its Secretary, Frauke Quader, must be congratulated for organising such a successful event and bringing so many organisations together. After all, all aspects of nature are interrelated and we need a coordinated effort to bring its importance home to the younger generation.

## Field Craft – Drongos (*Dicruridae*)

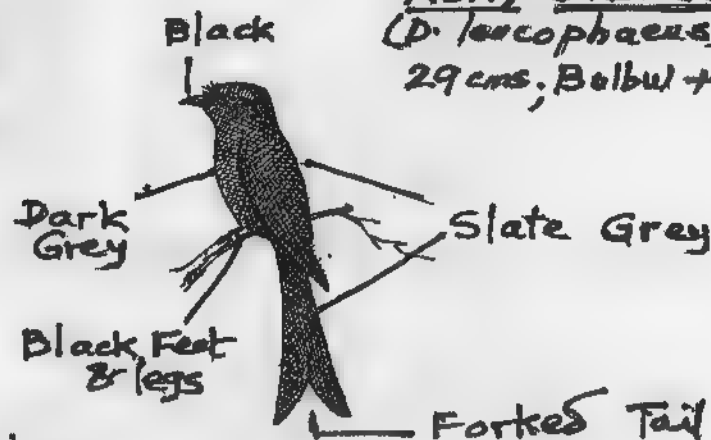
By Siraj A. Taher and Sachin Jaitare

Drongos (*Dicruridae*) are black birds with long, forked tails. They inhabit both forests and open country where they perch on exposed points looking for insect prey. Drongos are rather noisy and often solitary.

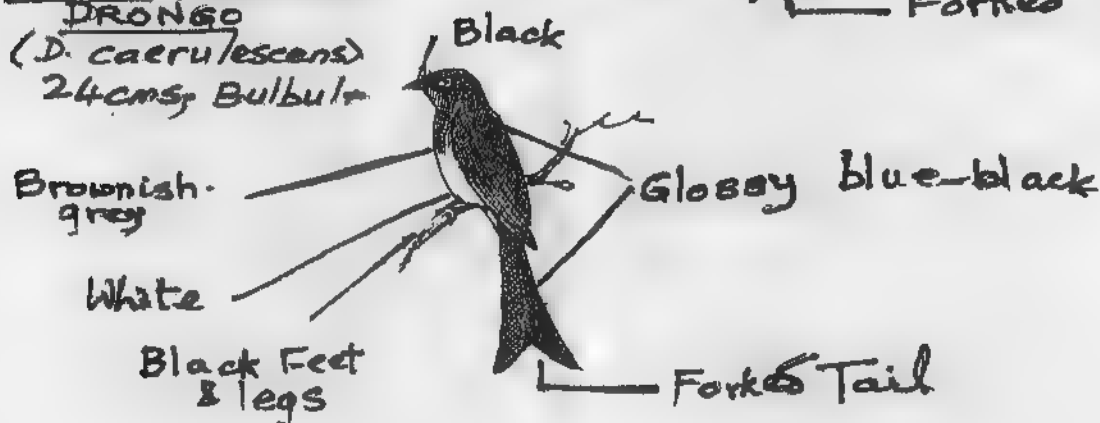
### BLACK DRONGO (*Dicrurus adsimilis*) 28cms ; Bulbul +



### ASHY DRONGO (*D. leucophaea*) 29cms ; Bulbul +



### WHITE-BELLIED DRONGO (*D. caerulescens*) 24cms ; Bulbul +





## Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

In bygone days, when the BSAP was in her formative years, a lot of us used to make a very basic mistake. Looking through the field notebooks of circa 1980 – 1981, we find absolutely no mention of a very common chap. Instead, we listed this fellow as a very uncommon member of his family. The mistake was only caught when we started to not just list, but to *identify* what we listed. And so we realised that the bird we were hitherto listing as the Common Babbler was, in fact, his more common cousin, the Whiteheaded Babbler. The name notwithstanding, the Common Babbler is anything but common. It is the Whiteheaded that is the commoner of the two. So, seeing that I have been suffering from quite frequent headaches these days, from the babbling of the Whiteheaded Babblers on the balcony, we will spend some time in the company of these “seven sisters” this month!

Very well-deserved is their colloquial name of “Saat Bhai” or “Seven Brothers”, (though the usual English rendition is “Seven Sisters”). You will never see a Babbler alone – though I have never attempted to actually count the numbers in a group. It might be interesting to try it sometime. A close acquaintance tells me that the name is a little short of the mark because the numbers in a group never exceeded six. He experimented with more than fifteen groups and could never get more than six in any of them. So be it – if the Seven Sisters are content with just six in the group, then doubtless there is good reason for that; and I am well content with it. No doubt, being so fond of each other, none of them can bear to be the “odd-one-out”, so they keep their numbers even.

The Whiteheaded Babbler also deserves the name in another manner. Very talkative birds they are, when the whole group is together. Chatter...chatter...chatter all day long... Enough to give anyone a headache. In the early hours of a Saturday morning, after a very long Friday at the office, I have often heartily wished that I had not taken up this letting out the balcony to our feathered friends. With a flock of babblers in the balcony, further sleep is out of the question. However, there is a plus side also. Having dragged myself out of bed with some difficulty and made myself a mug of tea, I stagger out to the balcony and am immediately greeted with shouts of joy from the entire group. The one who I classify as the leader of the troupe, immediately flies up to investigate the tea and ascertain whether it is fit to drink. He once actually stuck his beak into the hot liquid, getting well and truly scalded in the process. Since then, he has very wisely decided that the liquid is most dangerous and has many times attempted to tell me as much! The other members of the troupe meanwhile, are more interested in the biscuits. A single biscuit, crumbled and scattered on the balcony brings about the most disgraceful free-for-all with all the birds frantically scrambling around picking up the bits and frequently chasing away one of the others or, if the other has a bit in his beak, grabbing hold of a beakful of feathers and giving vent to loud screams of rage to persuade the other to drop the morsel. Altogether, a most delightful scene and I am well repaid for the slight discomfort

of having to rise far earlier than I would have done if the Babblers had not been around.

Apropos of the Whiteheaded/Common fiasco of the early days, those were the days when I was more adept with the airgun than with the binoculars; besides which it behove me to put my conclusions to the test. So I reasoned that I should make a determined attempt to procure a specimen of the bird in question and take it to a museum, or to a knowledgeable person and get the identification done beyond possible doubt. No sooner said than done, so it was out with the airgun and off to the garden to stalk a troupe of the babblers and obtain a specimen. I am happy to say, however, that the babblers were more than a match for me. One look at the fowling piece I was carrying, and they sailed off on lawful business of their own to places unknown. So, mouthing words of a pungent nature, I returned indoors, deposited my weapon in the room and sallied out again. Lo – the birds were back and carrying on their business regardless of the little interruption. Quick, where is the gun! Surely we must get a specimen now... Not so – the gun reappears in the garden, and the birds disappear as though by magic. Thoroughly disgusted, the gun is dispensed with and a pad and pencil substituted. The birds were quite amenable to that. I sat and sketched them in minute detail and they made no objection; though I have to confess that, at the end of the sketching session, I so far forgot myself as to fling my pencil at a rather stout chap standing very close to me. The bird hopped smartly out of the way, found that the pencil was not edible, gave me a rather reproachful glance and hopped away to rejoin the group... leaving me feeling very small indeed! In later days, I was so far successful as to get a specimen of the Whiteheaded Babbler. This set my identification down as perfectly correct. However, since by that time we had already determined the identity, I wasn't particularly pleased with myself for having deprived the group of a beloved member.

It is quite interesting to see the birds on the balcony deal with the question of food. The grain and fruit in the tray are, of course, of no use to them. They live mostly on insects, worms and such like. So the grain seeds and the fruit does not suit them. However, the flies that are attracted to the fruit are a different matter altogether. Though I am not absolutely certain of my facts, I suspect that there are at least two members of the balcony residents that have learnt to hop up to the tray and snap at the flies. I don't think any of them has succeeded in dining off one, but they continue to try. Actually, apart from my morning biscuit crumbs, there is nothing on the balcony for these chaps. In summer, they derive much solace from the water bowl, heaving, splashing and generally carrying-on as though they are thoroughly aquatic birds. By the time the whole group has finished, there is hardly any water left in the bath, though there is plenty on the balcony floor! Then the bath has to be filled again and the birds promptly repeat their performance – but this time with a rather smug look in my direction! It is at such times that I sometimes exercise discipline by means of a few judicious arm

movements that sends the babblers hurrying away and gives other birds a chance to get their drink and bath.

What possible use the birds have in the cages of the bird-seller, I am not quite certain. They are certainly not edible in nature, so there is no culinary purpose here. Nor are they disposed to whistle or sing, so they have no use as cage-birds either. But there they are, as many as a dozen stuffed into small cages and looking thoroughly miserable and woe-begone. I recollect on one occasion looking rather closely at a cage labelled "quail" and recognised several babblers, minus a tail! In this guise, they certainly resembled quail sufficiently as to fool the tyro. But I venture to suggest that the unlucky customer did not return to that particular establishment for his next helping of "quail"...! Nothing that we have heard about these birds from the elders has told us of their use for the table.

We are told that the nest of these birds is used by the Pied Crested Cuckoo to lay her eggs and hoist her rightful parental duties on these fellows. From what I have observed a couple of times, the babblers are well-aware of this deplorable habit and have several times tried to reason with the cuckoo to desist. It was interesting and instructive to see the whole flock descend en-masse on the unsuspecting pied crested cuckoo that once alighted in the mango tree opposite the balcony. I almost think the babblers hounded it out of a year's growth. The cuckoo knew it was beaten and hurriedly left the vicinity. I haven't seen him back for a long time now. The babblers, on the other hand, built their little nest on the same tree and, helped by the whole flock, soon had their babies hatched and tottering all over the tree, occasionally condescending to come

to the balcony and pick up some biscuit crumbs. No more endearing creature exists than a baby babbler. His head is far too large for his body and his little stumps of legs seem scarcely sturdy enough to support his dumpy body. There they sit, three in a row, on some small twig and, when a stiff breeze blows, the twig sways about and the birds frantically flap their little apologies of wings in a very heroic effort to maintain their balance and keep from tumbling down to the ground. One chap did once lose his balance and floated across to the balcony, from where he was quickly rescued by the rest of the group. They gathered around the youngster and soon succeeded in placating its ruffled feelings and leading it back to the tree that was its rightful home. True, he returned the next day for further investigations amongst the biscuit crumbs, but that is another matter altogether!

In the early days, when we lived in a large house with a considerable garden, there was always a flock of the birds in residence. Six or seven (as I said, I never counted), were always present. And the same is true of the balcony. Though I have never counted here either, there are always six or seven present most of the time. And though, as I have said, they tend to wake me up earlier than is my wont on a weekend, they are a pleasure to watch and guarantee you much amusement. Now that summer is approaching, you will see plenty of these chaps around. So this month keep the eyes opened for small groups of six or seven dusty brown birds with whitish heads. And when you do see them, take some time out to watch their antics and you will assuredly not be disappointed, or bored. Keep watching the Whiteheaded Babblers. Until next time .. Happy Birding!

## SIGHTING OF SARUS CRANE IN ANDHRA PRADESH

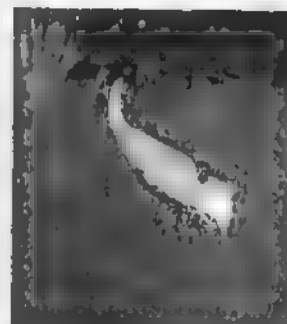
By K. Mrutyumjaya Rao

**L**ocation : Telneelapuram a village in the district of Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh. It is 3 km distance from Tekkali town and 3 km distance from Naupada railway station. Naupada is on Howrah - Visakhapatnam railway route about 705 km distance from Howrah and 179 km from Visakhapatnam. Some of the express trains stops at Naupada. There is bus connection from Visakhapatnam to Tekkali via Srikakulam and from Berhampur (Orissa) to Tekkali via Palasa.

Telneelapuram: From several decades this is an active Pelicanry. It is one of the three active Pelicanries of A.P. The general season is September - March. Along with Pelicans, Painted Storks also nests here. For the last two years the Openbilled Storks are also slowly establishing their colony at Telneelapuram. During the rainy season they are roosting near Telneelapuram's Pata Cheruvu. 'Dali Cheruvu' is an Irrigation tank near Telneelapuram with an area of 250 acres. It is a favourite site for resident birds and for migratory ducks during the waterfowl season. Generally 6000 to 8000 waterfowl visit this tank during winter, of which the Great Crested Grebe is one of the species. Their numbers are generally between 2 and 4. This year the total number of birds considerably decreased and their number is about 1500.

For the last three years I have been hearing the call of the Sarus Crane around the paddy fields of Naupada swamps and Telneelapuram. This year on 23-1-2006 I have sighted a Sarus Crane in the paddy fields about 0.5 km from Telneelapuram village along with Ramana K. and watchman Visweswara Rao. It is very active and shy and constantly maintains about 150 meters distance from intruders. The villagers and watchmen informed me that for the past 3 years they have been observing a pair of these birds but for the last two years only one Sarus Crane is to be seen.

Accommodation: Amarnadh lodge almost opposite to Tekkali bus stand. Two roomed guest house at Telneelapuram.



## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### THE INDIAN KOEL (*Eudynamys scolopacea*)

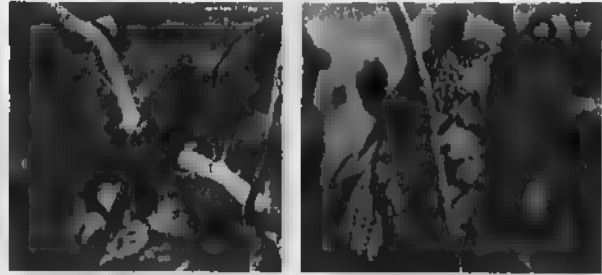
**T**he Indian Koel (*Eudynamys scolopacea*) is generally associated with Summer in this part of the country. As the days begin to hot up, the Koel bursts into song and its loud, penetrating call is heard at all hours of the day and, not infrequently, during the nights also. It generally begins to call around 3 in the mornings in peak summer. What the object is, of this midnight chorus, is not completely ascertained as yet.

The Koel is a member of the cuckoo family and has dispensed with the domestic chores. It has chosen the House Crows for the onerous duties of raising its young. The crows, for all their wit, are easily deceived by the birds as the male Koel shows itself in the tree that houses the nest of the crows. The pair of crows immediately give chase and, in doing so, leave the nest unguarded long enough for the female Koel to slip up and lay her eggs therein. When the crows return, they do not seem to notice the addition to their clutch and, before very long; they are busy feeding a speckled Koel chick.

To those who do not know the birds, the male and female Koel are so unlike as to almost be thought to be of different species. The male is a uniform bluish-black with a red eye and a yellowish-green beak. The hen is speckled white-and-brown, also with a red eye and a similar yellowish-green beak as her mate. Both have the characteristic short-winged cuckoo look. They are almost as large as the House crows, but they have longer tails and smaller bodies than the crows. Amongst the cuckoos of this region, they are about the largest of the tribe.

The pleasing notes of the Koel are the subject of many poems and ballads and the birds are generally well-represented in the literature of the sub-continent. Certainly their call is very pleasing when heard in the hot afternoons of the summer months. By around the middle of March, the birds should be in song. Their breeding season is generally towards the end of the summer months, which coincides with the nesting season of the House Crows, since the Koel is brood-parasitic on this species. It is interesting that they only choose the House Crows and not the Jungle Crows for this purpose.

Although these birds are still found in fair numbers, they also have suffered in the recent shift towards ornamental trees. Their staple diet is fruits and therefore they require some fruit bearing trees from which to get their sustenance. The current trend of cutting down the fruit-bearing trees such as *Peepul* and other *Ficus* species, and replacing them with exotic flowering species is detrimental to the population of these, and other birds of similar tastes. A *Ficus* or other wild fruit-bearing tree in the area is a definite plus with these birds. We need to make an effort to ensure that the birds continue to excite the poet and the writer with their presence and their songs.



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## PIGEON POST

By E-Mail on 15 Feb 2006-02-21

I got the new Pitta today. As usual it is a delight to read, especially the article by The City BirdBrain. I think it is written by Siraj Bhai. It was fun reading his article one day after visiting his house. Convey my good wishes to him or whoever is the author of that article.

Asad Rahmani

(Editor's note: Siraj Bhai thanks Dr. Rahmani for the compliment but assures him that he is not guilty of the charge of being The City BirdBrain! However, his compliments will be conveyed to the author with many thanks!)

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### For Private Circulation Only

For information, write to: Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India.

Editors: Siraj A. Taher, Humayun Taher.

Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: [baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk); [humayun.taher@gmail.com](mailto:humayun.taher@gmail.com)

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# IPBTTA

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## Field Outings

**Sunday, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2006: Nehru Zoological Park, Mir Alam** – Route: Begum Bazar, Naya Pul, Madina Hotel; Turn right at Madina and proceed past the Police quarters. Turn left at Tipu Darwaza and follow the road to the park on the right hand side of the road. Assemble at the gates by 6.45 A.M. The park is a good place for birdwatching. Inside the Lion Safari, there should be ground birds and also lots of warblers and flowerpeckers. The lake has a breeding population of Large Cormorants and also Painted Storks are breeding there. Even if they are captive birds, this does not detract from the fact that this is a wild nursery. Interesting observations have been made in earlier trips to this venue and there may be lots of surprises. Nightjars are seen, Stone Curlews used to breed near the Sambar enclosure and Grey Hornbills were seen nesting near the Train Station. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks.

For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3293 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

## Indoor Meeting

There will be no Indoor meeting in April.

## NEWS & NOTES

### Society Happenings – Field Trip to K B R National Park – 26-March-2006

By M. Shafaat Ulla

Our monthly field trip last Sunday on 26<sup>th</sup> March was to KBR Park. It was a rather short outing, as all field trips during summers tend to be short, because of the heat.

About 16 of us gathered at the gate at the appointed hour and entered the park promptly at seven. One new member, Anubhav joined in for the first time. Welcome to the gang, Anubhav! Col. Chander and Chowdhry were there with their newly acquired Binoculars – 8 x 40, Olympus. I am sure the proud owners are seeing the birds better.

After a short walk inside the park, we noticed Peafowl everywhere. They have really multiplied. It is my guess that there may be at least 200 Peafowl in the park, if not more. We also came across the few Grey Partridges who seemed to be quite bold and gave us a good view, probably they are used to seeing morning and evening walkers. We could not see any Painted Partridge, although we heard quite a few calls.

If I may divert a little – in the last Pitta (March 06) the editors' observation regarding KBR was, and I quote: "... and peafowl are numerous in the area." This is followed by "... There may be sightings of Grey and Painted Partridges, though the stray dogs have reduced their numbers somewhat." Do stray dogs have a weakness for partridges only? Let me assure the readers that I walk inside the park on designated walkways and have not seen a stray dog in the last 5-7 years. Also I am seeing increased number of Partridges and Quails.

After seeing the usual birds, including a Golden Oriole, we made it to the lake and parked ourselves on the elevated embankment. There were 25-30 Spot bills and a lone pair of Cotton Teals, not to forget Coots, Dabchicks, Little and Median Egrets and a few Cormorants.

While we were all scanning the lake, Dr. Praveen diverted our attention to bushes near the waters edge – and what do we see – a pair of Painted Snipe! They were busy foraging and we could observe them for at least half an hour from our vantage point. A little while later we saw them swimming in the water. Unlike snipes these Painted Snipes are probably capable of swimming, being closely related to the rail family.

After a good rest and sharing of breakfast, we moved on through treacherous bushes and undergrowth. When we finally came to a walkable clearing, Mridula spotted a grayish looking bird way inside the thick foliage and promptly went after it, closely followed by yours truly. I thought it was a Large Grey Babbler, but Mridula swore that it had a reddish vent. This threw us off and the bird remains unidentified.

We finally hit the main path and headed straight for the gate as it was past eleven and dispersed thereafter, having chalked up a bird count of about 35.

## RANDOM RAMBLINGS

By C. Bhaskara Rao

Of late, we are coming across some alarming reports about threats to the habitat of the Jerdon's Courser, and also of plans to build a road across the Chilkur Deer Park, thus cutting it almost in half. You can see the proposed road map at the HUDA office. Perhaps the time has come for us to take note of these developments and raise our voices in protest. BNHS has been making concerned efforts to bring this A.P. Bird (The Jerdon's Courser) into focus and to try and save its habitat. Recently, when it was found that the Irrigation Department was planning to construct a waterway (as part of the Telugu Ganga Canal works) in the areas where this critically endangered bird dwells, BNHS researcher P. Jeganathan alerted the A.P Forest Department, which swung into action and promptly impounded the machinery of the contractor and booked cases against him under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980 and the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972. Sri Asad R. Rahmani, Director of the BNHS, accompanied by representatives of WWF and the BSAP, met the Chief Secretary and the Irrigation Secretary. Both officials have shown interest in protecting the Jerdon's Courser. The Irrigation Secretary promised to divert the canal along the route suggested.

On our return from Dehra Dun, an indoor meeting of the society was held on Monday, 16<sup>th</sup> January 2006 at Vidyananya School. There was a good gathering of members and visitors that evening. Sri Shafaat Ulla spoke at length about the phenomena of mixed hunting parties. When some birds discover food, their calls attract the attention of their own

species, and the presence of large numbers of birds of a particular species in one place, generally attracts the attention of other species also. We noticed this phenomenon first in the Kadavapani area of Rajaji National Park, U.P.

The campus of the Wildlife Institute of India at Dehra Dun is quite large. The staff residential quarters are fenced with electric wire, to protect the houses from the onslaught of wild elephants. There is a large lake inside the campus, and some of us used to go birdwatching at the lake soon after getting up in the mornings. They have observed that when the weather was cold, bird activity is very low. Only after sunrise, when the weather has warmed up, do the birds emerge.

When we visited the lake early in the mornings, the lake was engulfed in mist and fog. The rays of the sun were penetrating through the trees and falling on the lake like streams of light, giving an ethereal atmosphere to the whole area. The moments that we spent there were most mesmerising. However, the birding activity was low, perhaps due to the cold. While returning from the lake, Vikram and myself noticed a Brownheaded Barbet, which is often heard, but seldom seen due to its camouflage. The campus of the Wildlife Institute of India is rich in birdlife. Just sitting in the quarters of Sri B.C. Choudhury, one can observe several species of birds. Smt. Nalini, wife of Mr. Choudhury is also a good birder. Just outside her kitchen window, we observed a Goldenbacked Woodpecker. Sri Choudhury says that when Dr. Rahmani visited them, he was able to see seven different species of woodpeckers. These birds visit the backyard for the rice which she scatters for them. Our members were able to see the Himalayan Treepie, Magpie Robins, Jungle Owlet and Indian Treepie in the area. I thank Mr. and Mrs. Choudhury for their hospitality towards the group.

Of late, an important birding hotspot has emerged at Kalivelli Wetlands, just 18 km. north of Pondicherry. It is India's second largest brackish water lake. Some of the birds seen here are Indian Courser, Painted Storks, Blackwinged Stilt, Lesser Flamingo and several other migratory and resident birds. Birds rest here on their way to Point Calimere and Sri Lanka. Information on this place can be found at <http://photoessays.net/kalivelli.html>. In case you are planning a trip to Pondicherry, maybe you can make an effort to visit this wetland.

## A NEW HERONRY AROUND HYDERABAD

By Humayun Taher

About a month ago, I had occasion to visit the Nehru Zoological Park. Although this was mostly a pleasure trip with the family, hardened birders like myself do not let opportunities like this slip. So the binoculars also formed a vital part of the equipment packed for the picnic.

While driving along inside the park, Mr. Siraj Taher and myself noticed some interesting activities in the large lake opposite the Lion Safari park. There was a considerable number of Large Cormorants in the vicinity. At first, we thought that this was unusual, but nothing more. Then we noticed that the large dead trees in the middle of the lake were all full of the same birds. And what was more, the birds were nesting there. Now this is interesting because although we have been seeing the Large Cormorants in the area for quite a long time, we had



not suspected that they were nesting in the park. I remember that on one of our BSAP visits to the Zoo, Kulkarni and myself had noticed that there appeared to be a heronry in the making in this area. At that time, we had noticed only Grey Herons and egrets, but it is now apparent that the Large Cormorants have also moved in here and have taken up the lake for nesting purposes. It remains to be seen though, if the heronry lasts, or whether it will be abandoned. Since there is a considerable traffic in the area, it could happen that the birds will abandon. On the other hand, there is not much disturbance to the birds in the middle of the lake. Since the lake is not part of the animal attractions, few people stand and stare at it, so there is hope for the future of the nesting birds.



An interesting sighting here was the nest of not only the Large Cormorants, but also a single nest of the Painted Stork. This particular nest is much closer to the road than those of the Cormorants, but there is no doubt about it since we saw the adults actually feeding a juvenile bird on the nest. Now this sighting is not only interesting but also very instructive. Two points are to be considered here; firstly as to whether these are wild birds and secondly, whether they will take up the organisation of a full-fledged heronry here.

As to the first point, I think that even if the birds were originally part of the displayed animals, the fact that they are nesting here points to them having taken up the status of wild birds. Certainly the juveniles of this nest are wild-bred birds. As regards the second point, there is no reason why, given sufficient protection, the heronry should not be established. The attraction of the Mir Alam Tank, just a few hundred yards away is a certain source of food for the birds, even if the Zoo Lake does not provide that. I remember that during the BSAP survey of protected areas, we had seen Painted Storks in the Zoo flying free, not caged specimens. It is quite possible that at least one of the birds of this breeding

pair is a wild bird. Further observations will continue to be made to see if this becomes another established heronry for this stork and the Large Cormorants that are already well-established at the place.

*(Editors Note: The Forest Department Authorities at the Zoo say that there are four pairs of Painted Storks breeding on this lake and that all of them are wild birds.)*

## Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

A small, olive-green bird with a russet head has taken to putting in an appearance at the balcony these days. What there is, on the balcony, apart from the company of other feathered friends, I am not able to say. But it is there and looks quite content to stay there. I suspect that the mango tree opposite the balcony has a sufficiency of the ingredients that go to making the life of the Tailor Bird. So, even though it is not part of the balcony residents, still it is an urban bird in the true sense of the term, and so we will utilise this month's column to discussing the properties of this little bird.

There is much in this bird that is interesting, even to the unbiased observer. To start with, the nest is one of the most artistic structures in the animal world. I reckon it is only surpassed by the weaver birds and maybe the bower birds of Australia. The nest is a small pouch, constructed very cleverly by gathering together a bunch of leaves of whatever tree is selected, cleverly stitching them together and then lining the resulting pouch with cobwebs, bits of down, cotton and other soft material. Therein they lay their little pea-sized eggs and hatch out their young. Interestingly, the birds are clever enough to only select trees with large leaves. Most preferred is the Mango whose large leaves lend itself very readily to the stitching. The other species is the wild Badam. The leaves of this tree are even larger than those of the mango and the birds have one major advantage in that they do not have to find three or more leaves growing close together. A single leaf

of the badam, twisted on itself and stitched along the edges becomes an admirable nest.

I have noticed that the bird on the balcony seems to enjoy the water bowl. No doubt, owing to the already considerable heat of summer, they find it refreshing to dip their little bodies in the cool water. I have noticed also that they invariably dip their beaks into the water, perhaps to test the temperature, before actually entering therein. It is a very quaint habit and rather amusing to watch. There the bird perches on the rim of the bowl and cautiously lowers its little beak into the water with a great air of concentration. Finding it right, the birds then forthwith hop off the rim of the bowl, straight into the water and, once inside, they swirl and splash with great enjoyment. Very amusing it is to watch, too.

Seeing that the diet of these birds consists largely of small insects, earwigs, spiders and such like, there is nothing on the balcony for the Tailor Birds. I personally feel that the only reason they are there is to enjoy the company and perhaps to partake of the water. But if that is the only attraction, I fail to see why the birds often come to the balcony even before summer, when there is no real pressing need of water; or why I often see it there alone, without any other company, feathered or otherwise.

Strangely enough, given their very small size, the birds are extraordinarily pugnacious. I have seen a Tailor Bird seeing off a Grey Babbler, which is more than three times its size. I have



also seen them giving a Whitebreasted Kingfisher a very hard time. I suspect that the Kingfisher had designs on the nest of the birds. And I suspect that the Tailor Birds suspected the same.

No-one has yet managed to discover the source of the thread that the tailor bird uses to stitch its nest. The general opinion is that it uses threads from cobwebs. Another school of thought holds that the bird has some other fantastic source of the threads that has never been discovered. Be that as it may, perhaps only the good birds know what they use, and we will be content with that.

In bygone days, when we lived in a large house with a considerable garden, there was a wild badam tree that a pair of Tailor Birds had thought suitable for building their nest in. We discovered the nest quite by chance when we observed the adults making frequent trips to a particular spot on the tree. However, there was an excellent reason why we could not make any detailed observations on the nest. It so happened that we had once put up a nest box on the tree and this had been appropriated by a swarm of honeybees and now they were well established in that box. The unfortunate part was that the box was no more than a few inches from the nest. As such, it was quite impossible to even think of doing battle on the nest, even in the interests of science. Honeybees are not to be trifled with. If Kipling was right (and I believe he was), there is no more terrifying thing in existence than an enraged swarm. Having once been in a prolonged battle with a single bee, in which I came off second-best, I can testify to the veracity of Kipling's statement. But not all birds are so difficult in their choice of nesting trees vis-à-vis science. One other pair we knew off had selected a small flowering hibiscus tree for their house. Being a mere three feet off the ground, and in an area entirely free from bees, (no; I lie - there was a hive in a tree some few hundred yards away!), I was able to sneak a glance into the cosy interior myself. This was in the old days, when I was just pushing on the three-foot mark myself, and inordinately proud of it!

The birds on the balcony have taken to sampling some of the spiders that have woven their webs in the corners. Usually,

the house maid is assiduous in the matter of sweeping out the corners very thoroughly and she was scandalized when I suggested to her that the balcony is much improved by the presence of these webs. She thought I was quite mad, but was rather too polite to say so outright. Anyway, she gave me up as a bad job, got to work with her broom again and shortly afterwards, the webs were a mere memory and the Tailor Birds were looking at me very reproachfully. I tried to explain that I was innocent, but was not altogether successful. However, the introduction of a few mouthfuls of scrambled eggs (I was having a late breakfast that day), soon restored the spirits of the birds. One of them decided that scrambled eggs, though doubtless poor fare, were at least better than nothing. So it flew on to my plate while I was inside searching for salt, daintily picked up a beakful and hurried off before I could salt the eggs and so render them unfit for bird consumption. It was interesting in that nothing I had ever heard of the birds had prepared me for the spectacle of watching them dine off a couple of scrambled eggs, and that too off my own plate - though I confess that I was not actually available at the plate at that time. Another interesting thing was that I noticed that they were careful to only select those bits that came from the white of the eggs - I wonder if this was mere coincidence, or whether the birds were making a point of avoiding cholesterol intake! Unfortunately, I incline to the former.

As a rule, the Tailor Bird is a very jolly little fellow and is given often to breaking into a very pleasing little tune. They are capital whistlers and always give the impression that they are having a good time, even when the temperature is a hundred and thirty in the shade! Given these excellent characteristics, it is not to be wondered that I am much gratified for their patronage of the balcony and my repeated requests to the house maid to be less energetic with her broom.

If you happen to have trees of the large leaf variety in or near your house, it would help to keep an eye open for these little birds and you may well be rewarded with the sight of one or two of the perky little chaps or, more rewarding, perhaps a glimpse of their very neat house. Keep watching the Tailor Birds this month. Until next time; Happy Birding!

## CITY PONDS - A HAVEN FOR BIRDS

*By Siraj A. Taher*

In the past few years, the Hyderabad city administration, Hyderabad Urban Development Authority (HUDA) and the Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad (MCH), and some others took it upon themselves to improve the small urban water-bodies and set up parks, walkways and children's play areas. These spots have now become small oases in the otherwise urban desert. One such place is the Vengala Rao Park on Road No. 1, Banjara Hills, to which I frequently go with my granddaughter. For the past three years I am observing that two pairs of Coots and at least two pairs of Whitebreasted Waterhens seem to be breeding in the park. While the Coots nested in two clumps of reeds, rearing broods of 4 young each; the waterhens (nest not located) had 6 young ones swimming merrily on the waterbody in the park.

The sad part of this successful breeding of the two species of waterbirds was that they had gotten used to being fed on bread and biscuit pieces by the people and children that visit the place. This is probably indicative that there is not sufficient natural food available for these birds in the pond. This breeding of both the Coot and the Whitebreasted Waterhen has been noted for the past three years around February-end to March-end. Some other birds seen in this park are Magpie Robin (in song), Ashy Wren Warblers, Dusky Crag Martins, Common and Wiretailed Swallows, Alpine Swifts, Pond Herons, Little Egrets and Indian Myna.

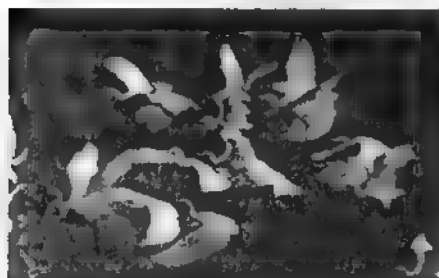
Similarly, the much larger parks, established several years back by the MCH, like the Sanjivayya Park and the Indira Park, have a much larger number of birds nesting. At Sanjivayya Park, the various birds recorded nesting are Black Drongo, Redvented Bulbul, Ashy Wren Warbler, Tailor Bird, Golden Oriole, Pied Myna and the Roseringed Parakeet. Some of the birds observed to be nesting regularly in Indira Park are Roseringed Parakeets, Indian Myna, Streaked Weaver Birds and Purple-rumped Sunbirds.

Apart from these there are several small parks and ponds like the Lotus Pond, Saroornagar Lake, Durgam Cheruvu, EPTRI and others spread around the urban and suburban areas of Hyderabad, which could be serving as small havens for some nesting birds. It will be an interesting and useful project if the society members can collect data from these parks and waterbodies, and then use this data to further improve the habitats and condition of these areas.

## UNUSUAL SCENE

By M.S. Kulkarni

While on the way to Kodangal and Daulatabad villages (R.R. Dist.), I came across an unusual scene. A few kilometres before Kodangal Town, on the left side of the Interstate Highway, a cattle carcass was seen, (probably a buffalo, as it was already skinned). A few pariah dogs were seen feeding on the carcass. About 60 Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) were also noticed near the carcass, apparently waiting to feed on it. The dogs were not allowing the birds to come near.



While returning back from Daulatabad, I have noticed that the dogs had stopped feeding on the carcass and there were only egrets feeding on it.

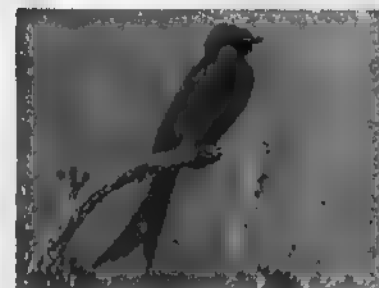
It is interesting to compare this scene with the one which we noticed on the way back from Upper Manair Dam (Karimnagar dist.) in January 2000. The members of the BSAP saw a carcass of some domestic cattle being fed upon by all of the three types of vultures; Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) – 2, Longbilled Vulture (*Gyps indicus*) – 15 and Whitebacked Vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*) – 17. These birds were actually driving off the dogs which were coming to get a share from the carcass.

It seems that we have been responsible for a change of beneficiaries on the scene. Instead of vultures, we see Cattle and Little Egrets (*Egretta garzetta*). Who knows the future of egrets, now?

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### THE BLACK DRONGO (*Dicrurus adsimilis*)

The Black Drongo or King Crow (*Dicrurus adsimilis*) is a bold and conspicuous bird that is often seen in areas within the city as well as in the outskirts and in scrub areas. It is easy to spot the bird as no other species of similar size and shape has so deeply forked a tail and jet black plumage. The sexes are alike. The birds generally inhabit open scrubland areas and light cultivation, where they are useful predators of locusts, grasshoppers and other insects. The birds generally are met with singly, except in the vicinity of the nest. The birds are found throughout the Indian Union, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.



They are generally met with in open country, sometimes seen attending on grazing cattle. They sometimes ride on the backs of the cattle, keeping their eyes open for grasshoppers, locusts and such like. Forest fires or fired grasses also attract large numbers of the birds on account of the insects that are disturbed by it. The birds are highly beneficial to agriculture, on account of the vast quantities of injurious insects they destroy. But they also feed on flower nectar and very occasionally on small birds. The calls are a variety of harsh scolding or challenging calls, sometimes bearing a remarkable resemblance to the calls of the Shikra. To the uninitiated, the calls are sometimes so alike as to cause considerable confusion.

A well known feature of these birds is their extreme pugnacity in the protection of their nest. They are known to put even the much larger Crows to flight if they see any in the vicinity of their nests. Knowing this habit other, more timid birds often build their nests close to the nest of the Drongo so that they too may profit from the protection afforded by the pugnacious birds. The nesting season is generally from April to August. The nest is a small cup of fine twigs and fibres, covered and cemented with cobwebs.

Some protection is necessary even for these birds. The Black Drongo has a place in legend and is sometimes called "Zulfiqar" in Urdu, owing to the forked tail which is said to bear a resemblance to the double-edged sword, (called "Zulfiqar"), of Imam Ali. As such, they are caught in numbers and sold to the faithful who then immediately release them as a form of blessing. Even though the birds are eventually released, this poaching does take its toll and it certainly requires to be stopped at once. This apart, habitat degradation also is affecting these birds and, as the friend of the farming fraternity, the species is certainly deserving of protection, which is long overdue to it and to similar species.

## Trivia – Collective Nouns for Birds

Compiled by Siraj A. Taher

There was a time when the British had nothing much to do. They therefore spent their idle time inventing so interesting words, which every birdwatcher would do well to learn. Some of them, all collective nouns, are given below:

1) A Bevy	of QUAILS	19) A WEDGE	of GEESE/SWANS (when flying in a 'V')
2) A BOUQUET	of PHEASANT (when flushed)	20) A HOST	of SPARROWS
3) A NYE	of PHEASANTS (on the ground)	21) A MUSTER	of PEACOCKS
4) A BROOD	of HENS	22) A PARLIAMENT	of OWLS
5) A PEEP	of CHICKENS	23) A PARTY	of JAYS
6) A BUILDING	of ROOKS	24) A SIEGE	of HERONS
7) A KETTLE	of HAWKS/FALCONS (flying)	25) A SPRING	of TEALS
8) A CAST	of HAWKS/FALCONS (sitting)	26) An UNKINDNESS	of RAVENS
9) A CHARM	of FINCHES	27) A WATCH	of NIGHTINGALES
10) A COLONY	of PENGUINS	28) A MURDER	of CROWS
11) A COMPANY	of PARROTS/WIDGEONS	29) A CONVOCATION	of EAGLES
12) A COVEY	of PARTRIDGES/GROUSE (single family)	30) A CHATTER	of STARLINGS/CHOUGHS
13) A PACK	of PARTRIDGES/GROUSE (more than one family)	31) A MUSTERING	of STORKS
14) An EXALTATION	of LARKS	32) A WISP	of SNIPES
15) A FLIGHT	of DOVES/CORMORANTS/GOSHAWKS/SWALLOWS	33) A FLOTILLA	of SWANS
16) A GAGGLE	of GEESE (when on water)	34) A RAFT	of SHOVELLERS
17) A FLOCK	of GEESE (on the ground)	35) A PADDLING	of DUCKS (on the water)
18) A SKEIN	of GEESE (in flight)	36) A COVERT	of COOTS
		37) A CONGREGATION	of PLOVERS
		38) A SEDGE	of HERONS
		39) A FALL	of WOODCOCKS
		40) A DESERT	of LAPWINGS

## PIGEON POST

**Kothur Lake:** 15 km. from Zahirabad, towards Bidar. Adjacent to Trident Sugar Factory, Kothur, Medak District.

This lake has always fascinated me and draws my attention while I was making monthly trips to Latur Town, in Maharashtra. I used to notice a lot of bird activity on the water-body.

On 12<sup>th</sup> March, while returning back from Bidar Town, I noticed unusual bird activity on the water. Though the state highway passes adjacent to the water body, bird activity was not unduly disturbed. The birds counted on 12-3-06 at this water body were Spoonbill (*Platalea leucordia*) – 60, Black-headed Ibis (*Theskiornis melanocephalus*) – 7, Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) – 35, Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*) – 7, Black-bellied Tern (*Sterna auranticauda*) – 15. It seems that the water body has the maximum number of birds towards the evenings.

M.S. Kulkarni  
12/03/2006 (By mail)

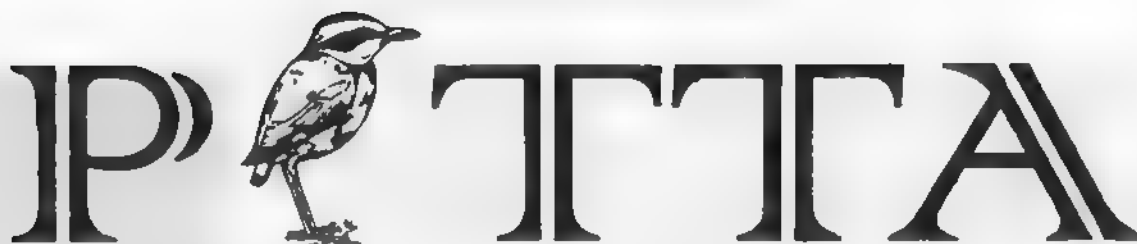
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Editors: Siraj A. Taher, Humayun Taher

Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: [baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk); [humayun.taher@gmail.com](mailto:humayun.taher@gmail.com)

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Donations to the Society are exempt from tax u/s 80G(3)(vi) of I.T. Act, 1961.

### Field Outings

**Sunday, 25<sup>th</sup> June 2006: Indira Park, Domalguda - Route: Lower Tank Bund Road - use the flyover opposite the Secretariat gates. Turn right towards RTC X-Roads and the park is on the left-hand side of the road. Assemble at the gates by 7.15-7.30. Some cars may start from Punjagutta Cross-roads.** This used to be a very good place for birdwatching at one time. There are large trees in the park that provide sightings of Grey Hornbill and Orioles. Cormorants used to nest in the palm trees adjoining the large pond in the centre of the park. This same pond has some interesting reedbeds that used to be nesting spots for Purple Moorhens and Whitebreasted Waterhens. During the BSAP survey of protected areas, we have records of Green Pigeon from this site. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks.

For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3293 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

## NEWS & NOTES

### Society Happenings – Field Trip to EPTRI Campus 21<sup>st</sup> May 2006

By *Shafali Moorthy*

The day, 21<sup>st</sup> May, was nice and sunny – perfect for bird watching. All the bird watchers headed towards Gachibowli to the EPTRI Campus, where we hoped to see a good many birds. The members arrived by 7.15 am and we set off to see the water body within the campus. It was quite a shallow body, not holding too much water but definitely enough water for a couple of Little Grebes and the Cormorants. One of the Cormorants decided to set itself on the rock and sun itself. With its wings stretched one could see that it was enjoying itself. Soon an Indian Robin appeared on one of the grassy banks. It hopped around for sometime looking for insects before taking off over the campus wall. Just as we were planning to move on, a Common Kingfisher attracted our attention. It flew to and fro from the rock to the lone tree in the tank before diving in for food. It appeared to have learnt something from the Pied Kingfisher, for it hovered above the water. My father said he hadn't seen it happen before either. In the two dives that it made it was successful once with a small fish in its beak which it gulped. Since it disappeared after that, our group decided to move on, but only after we had looked at the Red-wattled Lapwing.

We decided to enter the scrub through a path leading to a small temple. Here the group split up, though everyone was within shouting distance. We didn't see as many birds as we hoped to see in the bush. However, we did see an aggregation of beetles on a few trees. They walked, or rather crawled over one another in order to reach their destination which appeared to be the same. They were quite fascinating to watch. We also saw a Sunbird's nest, and just as we were going to look inside, the Purple-rumped Sunbird took off from within the nest. There were two eggs, but not all looked at it, as we didn't want to disturb it. We soon heard a Coucal calling, but as it was in deep scrub, we didn't really see it. We decided not to venture inside, as no one was particularly excited about scratching themselves in order to see the few birds. Most of the group then headed back for breakfast, while some of us stood back to watch a wasp hunting around and Sunel told us fascinating facts about their behaviour.

Everyone satisfied their insides with hot *idlies* and *vadas* and a cup (or two) of coffee and/or tea, served by the members of EPTRI (thank you EPTRI!). After breakfast, we saw a Red-vented Bulbul with a small thin twig in its beak. As we watched it, we saw that it was starting to build a nest. However, it soon took off, and wasn't sighted after that. While waiting for the others to come out, a rock lizard and a garden lizard caught our attention. The rock lizard was comparatively better and nicer to look at, with its black coat and reddish



orange body. The garden lizard was well camouflaged, and merged so well with the grass that it was hardly noticed.

As it was beginning to get warmer, we all settled on some grass and Suhel decided to conduct a quiz. However, before it could start, a couple of bigger lizards took it into their heads to pose for us bird watchers. Once the lizards had been viewed and peace restored, we went back to the quiz. It was decided that we would have four teams namely, the dodos, the pigeons, the vultures and the babblers. The more experienced birdwatchers were to ask the questions. The questions asked were good ones, and did require a wee bit of thinking. Ultimately, the babblers won (although they did really babble the answers out of turn to the others!!!) and earned themselves badges which were for the protection of vultures.

Once the quiz was over, attendance sheets signed, it was time to get a move on. Shafaat uncle sold T-shirts and caps; everyone said their goodbyes and left. Although we didn't see too many birds, we still enjoyed the very beautifully laid out campus and the half a day that we spent there.

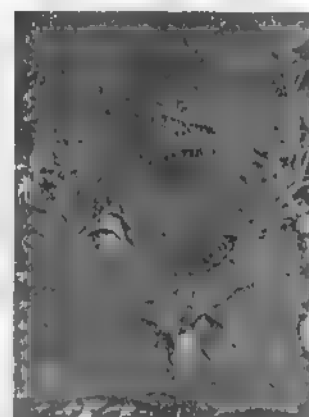
### **PARENTAL INSTINCTS OF THE WHITEBREASTED WATERHEN (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*)** **Observations during BSAP trip to EPTRI Campus, Hyderabad**

*By Humayun Taher*

**D**uring the BSAP trip to the EPTRI campus in Gachli Bowli, Hyderabad on 21st May 2006, an interesting observation on the parental instincts of the Whitebreasted Waterhen was made. When I first saw the bird, it was foraging on the edge of a small pool of water, accompanied by a very small chick, still covered in black down feathers. A Pond Heron was also foraging near the water's edge and the adult Waterhen obviously regarded it as a potential danger. However, when it observed me, standing on the road (about 20 metres from the pond), the bird became alarmed and immediately retreated into a small clump of weeds that grew near the water's edge. I settled down on the road to see whether I could get another sighting, and possibly a photograph of the young bird.

About a minute later, an adult Waterhen appeared out of the same clump of weeds and began to forage close to my side of the pond. Although the bird gave an appearance of foraging, I was able to observe that it always had one eye in my direction and appeared to be seeing what I was doing. I was watching

this bird keenly when I observed a movement behind the weed clump from which the bird had emerged, and I saw another adult Waterhen leading a line of three chicks towards a particularly large thicket of bougainvillea creepers nearby, where I think the birds had their nest. I had a mind to follow this adult but refrained since it would have badly disturbed the chicks and could have led to their being preyed upon by the Pond Heron that was still in the area.



What was interesting is that as soon as the chicks and the other adult had gained the shelter of the bougainvillea creeper, the adult that had been foraging near the water's edge also rapidly ran towards the same creepers and disappeared within. It was obviously a ploy on the part of the adult to divert attention of a potential danger and allow the young birds to be led to safety, similar to the broken wing display that many ground birds indulge in, to guard their young against predators.

Now, this observation gives rise to two questions - firstly, how did the adult birds communicate to each other (I did not hear any vocalisation during the entire period, except a couple of small "cheeps" from the chicks as they were being led into the thicket). It was obvious that there had to be some communication amongst the adults to determine that one of them would act as the decoy and the other would lead the young to safety. The second question is whether this is a ploy that is regularly used by the species, or is it something that the adults had thought out themselves. I studied the subject in the Handbook of the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent, and could find no reference of this behaviour in this species. So it appears that this is something that the adults had either learnt themselves, or had used earlier with good results. I am not sufficiently qualified to theorise on the learning potentials of birds but it is obvious that there is material here for some good research.

I would welcome ideas and suggestions on this behaviour, and also other such observations on the parental habits of these birds that other members may have noticed.

### **Column: Urban Birding**

*By The City BirdBrain*

**O**ccasionally these days, I am roused out of a sound sleep by loud, though not unmusical calls in the night. This midnight chorus is not caused, as may be thought, by owls but by another bird that, although posing as a

daytime creature, seems to be equally at home in the nights. This midnight songster is no other than the largest of our cuckoos - that very melodious bird of the summer, the Indian Koel. This month, seeing that the temperature is over a

hundred in the shade, leaving me in no doubt about it being summer, we will talk about this summer bird.

Since the temperature in the shade is regularly crossing a hundred, perhaps it is not surprising that the Koel has taken it into its head to become nocturnal. Considering that the nights are generally slightly cooler (I will not call them cold), it may well be that the birds have decided to use this cooler time for their activities. If this is so, then it argues that the Koel is a bird I would be most proud to shake hands with! This would be intelligence of no mean order. Sitting in the balcony of a summer afternoon, I have often wished I could become nocturnal myself!

Intelligence is one thing that is essential to the success of a Koel family. They hoist their parental duties on those very clever birds, the crows. And in order to do so, it is imperative that they show themselves to be cleverer than the step-parents of their chicks. To their credit, they seem to be quite good at managing this difficult feat. I remember a sighting of a crow nest in Sanjivayya Park, absolutely stuffed to overflowing with Koel chicks and not a single crow chick anywhere in sight. The modus operandi is generally that the Koel male shows himself near the nest of the crows and these birds, fully aware of his nefarious purposes, promptly give chase. In so doing, the nest is left unguarded long enough for the hen Koel to fly in and deposit her eggs. Crows are fully capable of counting upto two and if the numbers of eggs in the nest exceed that number, they are not aware that any additions have been made. So they settle down and incubate and, in due course of time, the world is further graced by the arrival of more Koels to continue their very pleasing song, and occasionally to wake me out of a sound sleep on summer nights!

To those who do not know these birds, it is impossible to suppose that the male and female are related. They are the only species of cuckoo where such a marked difference in the sexes is known. Why this should be so has not yet been conclusively decided and doubtless, the only creatures in the know are the Koels themselves. Be that as it may, if the plumages are different, there is one point in which both the male and female are remarkably alike; that roguish red eye of theirs. A single look into that eye is enough to convince the beholder that here is a bird that specialises in mischief and, what is more, revels in it. However, this is not entirely correct for the only mischief that these birds do is their habit of harrying the unfortunate crows of their neighbourhood. And the crows are definitely capable of getting their own backs up, so the slur is cleared off the head of the Koels!

These birds were celebrated in legend and song as well; an older generation of bards was wont to spout immortal prose and poetry on the "sweet voice of the Koel in the orchards..." It could hardly be otherwise, given their very sweet song, even if that song is heard in the small hours and wakes one out of sound and refreshing sleep! The foibles of a talented individual however, have to be overlooked and, if the song be

sweet, I personally count myself well compensated for being woken up.

I have recently taken to spending more time in the company of the feathered friends on the balcony. One of the reasons for this, of course, is a slackening of the pressure of work. The second reason is that I am receiving a considerable number of visitors and it behoves a good host to be present and do his duty as host. One of the birds of this considerable number is a single hen Koel. She lands heavily on the balcony, stares around imperiously and then, with a very self-assured air, swaggers up to the food tray and, perfunctorily brushing aside the sundry mynas and pigeons, proceeds to help herself. A fruiting ficus tree nearby is regularly visited by myself for the express purpose of picking up several pounds of dropped fruit and this is one of the items on the menu in the food tray these days. The Koel is most appreciative of this and she helps herself with a very lavish hand indeed. Then, looking around, presumably to assure herself that the host is around and has seen her enjoying the hospitality, she peers vaguely back at the tray and, satisfied that it no longer holds anything of koelian interest, she regretfully flaps off. Or, if the day happens to be a trifle warmer than normal, she may treat herself to a very lavish bath in the water bowl. I notice that everything the Koel does, is done lavishly. Feast of ficus berries - lavish; bath - lavish and song - lavish. A very lavish bird, this chap; even to the lavishness of waking the sleeper!

Summer is the accredited time that the Koel is generally supposed to wake up. They are present most other times of the year as well but, for some reason, they are quite innocuous during the other seasons and it is but rarely that they are seen or heard during the winters and the monsoons. I have had one alight on the balcony during a particularly violent monsoon storm, and so miserable did the little male look that I quite failed to recognise the spruce Koel in this bedraggled specimen. The feathers of most passerine birds that are not water-dwellers are said to be not waterproof - but the Koel appears to possess especially porous feathers. What my visitor was clad in appeared to be a waterproof of some description that had a tendency to leak in every seam. He was quite the most miserable chap I have ever seen. However, some time in the balcony, close to my teacup from which the steam rose pleasantly warm put him to rights and, when the rain appeared to ease off somewhat, he returned to his own haunts; though I must also record that he returned the next day with a couple of his cronies. At least, I think it was him but I was not entirely able to place him accurately in my list of close acquaintances.

When not waking people up, the koels are very pleasant chaps to have in the garden. The pleasing voice and generally active disposition make them capital visitors and the only reprehensible thing about them is their habit of playing midnight songs. However, as I said before, the song is a pleasant one and one can easily drop off to sleep again. So, this month keep the ears open (and the eyes also) and even if the songs keep you awake nights, spend some time watching the Koels. Until next month... happy birding!

## Field Craft – Siraj A. Taher and Sachin Jaltare

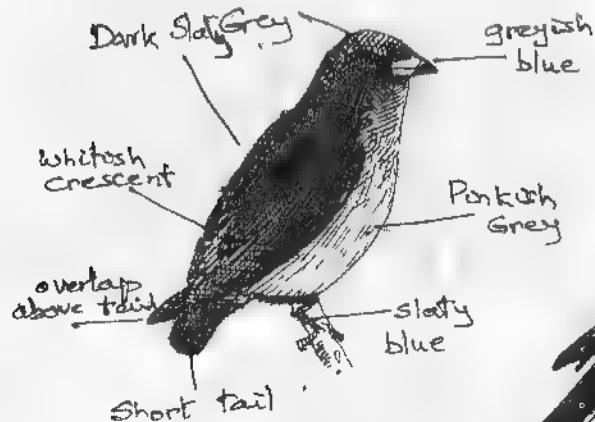
WOOD SWALLOWS are plump birds with large, sharp Drongo-like bills. Their wings are long with small legs and short tails. Sexes alike.

ORIOLES are beautiful yellow and black birds. Females are duller coloured, usually green. Young are streaked. Orioles have strong pointed bills and stout legs. They are partial to leafy trees.

### ASHY WOOD SWALLOW

(*Artamus fuscus*)

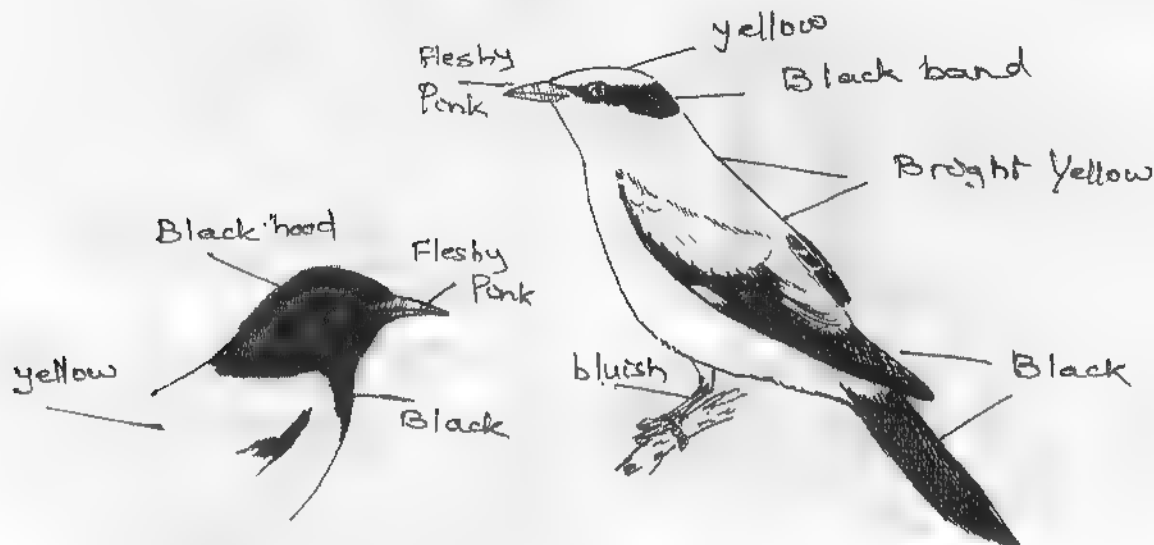
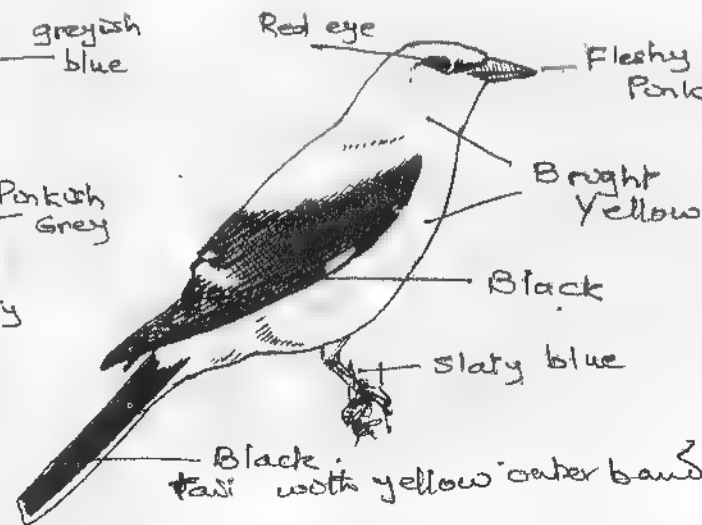
19 cms Bulbul ±



### GOLDEN ORIOLE

(*Oriolus oriolus*)

25 cms - myna



### BLACKHOODED ORIOLE

(*Oriolus xanthomus*)

25 cms - myna

### BLACKNAPED ORIOLE

(*Oriolus chinensis*)

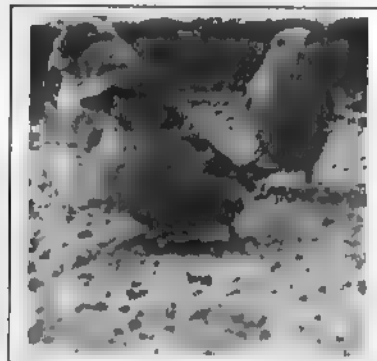
25 cms Myna

## WHERE HAVE ALL THE SPARROWS GONE! TO DUBAI?

By M. Shafaat Ulla

**G**ood question. Many people nowadays complain that our House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) are not to be seen in Hyderabad any more. This is true to a large extent as they have really become rare, especially in the city. However they are still to be seen in small numbers in Begum Bazaar and other similar areas, as also in the suburbs and villages.

This question of their disappearance, or shall we say decline, is often directed towards birding honchos like Siraj, Aasheesh, etc. Their normal response is change in the housing patterns (read apartment complexes, concrete houses), scarcity of food (we are using more and more packaged food items), lack of nesting sites, absence of insects to feed the chicks (high chick mortality), etc., etc. Most of these reasons are probably casual observations without the backing of scientific study, although ultimately the various theories seem quite plausible. In fact this problem is also observed in certain areas in England, and a famous birding publication has offered a fairly substantial prize to whosoever comes up with a scientifically proven hypothesis for the reason for this declining trend in sparrow populations, particularly from their traditional areas. To my knowledge, nobody has won the prize yet.



Now the readers will doubtless be wondering what has Dubai got to do with all this. I had gone to Dubai for a week during the first week of May. Throughout my stay here, I saw sparrows everywhere. They are a common sight not only in Dubai but also in Sharjah and neighbouring Abu Dhabi. One can see them in trees, sandy parking lots, on public and private lawns and gardens, among apartment buildings, villas, what have you! I stayed both in an apartment and also in a villa (an independent house, at it is known there), and at both the places I could hear a loud cacophony of sparrow calls early in the morning, which unfortunately, cannot be experienced in many parts of Hyderabad.

Now, my question is, how come sparrows are found and thriving in Dubai where conditions are more or less similar, if not worse (from the sparrows' point of view), than our own modern Hyderabad? I am sure not only me but my other readers would be curious to know the reason why sparrows are deserting Hyderabad, but seem to be quite content in Dubai, which I thought attracted only people. Can some birding experts enlighten the readers with regard to the abovementioned observations?

(Note: It is suggested that we do a survey of sparrow populations in Hyderabad, locality-wise, say for about two hours on a few Sunday mornings. Volunteers can give their names to me and we can jointly work out the logistics.)

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## Canal Re-routing Throws India's Rarest Bird a Lifeline

**T**he future for one of Asia's most threatened and enigmatic birds looks brighter, thanks to a decision by the Andhra Pradesh State Government's Irrigation Department that should safeguard the future of Jerdon's Courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*) last known site.

Jerdon's Courser, a Critically Endangered nocturnal bird, was discovered in Central India, around 1848 by Dr. T.C. Jerdon, a British Army medical officer. The species was then lost for 86 years before its remarkable rediscovery in 1986, in Andhra Pradesh by Bharat Bhushan from the Bombay Natural History Society.

At the time of its rediscovery, the Courser's scrub-jungle habitat was threatened by the construction of the Telugu-Ganga canal, agricultural irrigation project. Prompt action led to the creation of the Sri Lankamalleswara Wildlife Sanctuary to protect the species.

In October 2005, unauthorised work on the canal commenced once again, around the border of the wildlife sanctuary. This led to the destruction of a newly discovered site for the species, as forest was cleared and channels excavated. In January 2006 the Irrigation Department announced they would re-route the canal to avoid the birds' habitat. On 14 February, India's Central Empowerment Committee ruled on the precise route the canal could take, so as to avoid the Courser's habitat entirely.



"The Irrigation Department are to be warmly congratulated for re-routing the canal. Thanks to them, the future for India's rarest bird looks brighter," said Dr. Asad Rahmani, Director, BNHS.

"The unilateral conservation community applauds the decision to safeguard the future of one of India's most precious birds. It would have been tragic if Jerdon's Courser was driven to extinction only 20 years after its world famous rediscovery," commented Dr. Stuart Butchart, Birdlife's Global Species Programme Co-ordinator.

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### THE COMMON MYNA (*Acridotheres tristis*)

**T**he **Common Myna** (*Acridotheres tristis*) is a medium sized chocolate brown bird, about 12 cm tall, with a black head and neck, bright yellow bill, legs and orbital skin. White wing patches are obvious when the birds are flying. Juvenile mynas look a bit different but are also easily recognisable as mynas. The ones found on the island country of Sri Lanka tend to be of a darker shade of brown. The Indian Myna has a conspicuous white patch which shows when the bird is in flight. This bird has a variety of sharp calls that is uttered with an absurd bobbing of the head.

This is one of the various tropical starlings found in South and Southeast Asia. It is widespread throughout the Indian subcontinent including the islands of Andaman, Nicobar, Lakshadweep and the Maldives where it was introduced. It is a very visible bird, thanks to its affinity to human habitats. It has a habit of following humans around. You will see them attending on grazing cattle for the booty of the cattle's back and the grasshoppers of the ground, hopping around and partying on the rubbish piles in the city and also following the plough for earthworms in the country side. It is an omnivorous bird and eats whatever its habitat has to offer.



All Common Indian Mynas, except females incubating eggs or young, sleep at night in communal roosts. Every night all the mynas within a kilometre or so of where they feed or nest gather at a communal roost. Up to several hundred birds may gather at these communal roosts, which are usually in a tree or other vegetation with dense foliage. Roosts are not always in trees but may be in creepers, buildings or under bridges. There are usually several roosts in each suburb. Communal roosts of Common Indian Mynas are usually quite easy to find by looking for flying mynas about half an hour before it gets dark. If you follow the line of flight you'll soon get close enough to hear them. If there are a lot of birds in the roost you can hear them from several hundred metres away. It is rare for other birds to roost in Myna roosts.

Common Mynas build nests in hollow trees and also in holes in walls and on the sides of old wells. Four to six eggs are laid. It is presumed that both sexes share in the parental duties. The normal nesting season is from May to July, in common with that of other Myna species. There is evidence that in Australia, where these birds are a serious problem, the birds are known to mate for life.

Common Mynas are very opportunistic and there appears to be evidence that they are doing quite well in recent times. They are good talkers and are often seen in the cages, to cater to this demand. As such, perhaps there is good need to protect these birds as no bird species can compete against the human greed. Habitat loss also plays a part in their decline and, though the current population seems to be quite good, there is no serious work done on the populations of the species and see whether it is currently increasing or declining. Until such time as we can pronounce on this, it would be as well to ensure that the birds receive as much protection as is possible.

#### For Private Circulation Only

For information, write to: Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India.

Editors: Aasheesh Pittle, Siraj A. Taher, Humayun Taher.

Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: [bsap2002@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bsap2002@yahoo.co.uk), [humayun.taher@gmail.com](mailto:humayun.taher@gmail.com)

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## Field Outings

**Sunday, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2006: Sanjivayya Park, Necklace Road – Route: Tank Bund Road – NTR Marg – Necklace Road. Assemble at the gates by 7.15-7.30. Some cars may start from Punjagutta Cross-roads.** This is a good place for birding just before the advent of the monsoon rains. Crows nest in the park and also Black Drongos and Pied Starlings. Occasionally Chloropsis are also seen. Golden Orioles also nest in the park and could be seen. Plenty of warblers around – and the lakeshore should provide some wading birds like Stilts and Moorhens. Terns and probably a few Gulls also could be around. It may be a bit early for the huge influx of wagtails that are seen in Sanjivayya Park, but there may be a few around, so keep the eyes peeled. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks.

For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3293 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

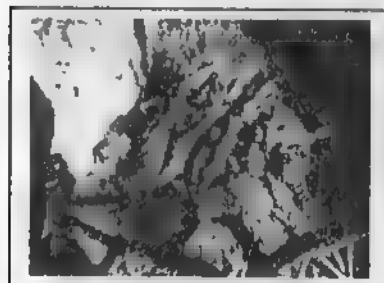
## NEWS & NOTES

### A Morning Trip to Chilkur and Himayath Sagar

*By Humayun Taher*

**E**arly on the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> of June, accompanied by Dr. Keith Edwards (A visitor from Scotland, who was keen to see some *Bharatiya* birds), I visited Chilkur Deer Park and Himayath Sagar. There was considerable bird activity in Chilkur. We were greeted on arrival by Indian Robins and Common Iora, while the Golden Orioles that used to nest near the EEC were still there, and still nesting; though the location of the nest had changed a little.

Walking in the park, we were struck by the profusion of Small Greenbilled Malkohas. We saw no less than 9 in the course of the walk. As the Malkohas are very retiring birds and even seeing a single one is quite an event, this sudden population explosion was very interesting. We were not able to ascertain whether we were seeing 9 different birds, or merely the same birds again and again.



Other interesting birds here were Tickell's Blue Flycatchers, Coppersmith

Barbets, Green Bee-eaters and Common Indian Nightjar. A Stone Curlew took hurried flight when our approach disturbed it. Peafowl called all over the park and we even saw a small covey. Partridges also were in call all over and we were lucky enough to see a single chap scuttling off into the bushes. Near the waterhole we saw a Redwattled Lapwing screaming its head off, as usual. Plus there were sundry Bulbuls, Babbiers, Prinias and Flowerpeckers around as usual.

Having completed a circuit of Chilkur, we decided to continue the good work and visit the backwaters of Himayath Sagar. This turned out to be a very good decision since we saw some very interesting species there. Foremost of these was the Painted Stipe. We first saw a male purr out from under our feet, fly about 20 yards and then drop to the ground as though badly hurt. Then he started to perform the well-known "Broken-Wing Display". A very realistic performance he put up too, but we were not so green as to be taken in. Instead, recognising his actions we started to search for the chicks but failed to spot them.

Carrying on, we saw a couple of very interesting wading birds roaming around the shores. These were a pair of Small Indian Pratincoles. And they gave us quite good views as they perched on small stones and mounds on the shore quite close to where we were standing. They did not seem too concerned about our presence. The Little Ringed Plover was a bit more retiring and decided he did not want a closer acquaintance

with us. However, before we could be disappointed at his retiring disposition, we saw the chicks of the Painted Snipe! There were two of them, tottering after the adult. Since this was quite a distance from where we had seen the other bird, I assume that this was a different family but I could not be certain of it. The chicks were very precocious and, as soon as we approached too close, they squatted – and melted into their surroundings. We did not disturb them too much and, pausing only to take a couple of photos, we left the birds alone and continued our walk. Looking back, we were in time to see the adult come close to the hidden chicks, summon them to his side and trot off towards an outcrop of rock; where I think he found a nice convenient hiding place.

Having concluded our birding at this spot, we decided to get back. Taking a different route from our approach route, we saw a lot of birds at the Kondapur Tank so we decided to stop and see what was on offer. Here, we were pleasantly surprised to see more than about 30 Large Cormorants, several adult and immature Night Herons, which were disturbed when we approached too close to a large reedbed, and a few adult and immature Grey Herons perched on an electricity pylon in the middle of the lake. A Purple Moorhen also was seen in the reedbeds.

Having finished here, we returned. A very good morning's birding furnishing more than 50 species at the three sites, and several of them being very interesting species, not seen everyday. I think I need to do this more often!

## Trip report: Rishi Valley School or The Confessions of an inept birdwatcher

By Arjun Surendra

One day while I was happily loafing around near my house, contemplating life, the universe and issues of vital importance, such as what was on offer for lunch, my reverie was shattered by a strange call. As I was wondering what bird could make such a call, I was surprised to see the call being repeated in a pattern not dissimilar to the tune of the Mexican Hat dance. It was my cell phone. On the line was Dr Suhel Quader who made me an offer, as Brando once put it, I could not refuse. Suhel was going to the Rishi Valley School to work on his project there. He is studying the relationship between brood parasites and their hosts, in particular studying the parasitism on Crows by Koels. He needed someone to come along for the long trip by road. Road trip and birding at a new place! As I said, an offer I could not refuse.

We set off early in the morning on 25<sup>th</sup> May. The weather was just perfect for such an excursion. En route we saw a number of Indian Rollers (*Coracias benghalensis*), Palm Swifts (*Cypsiurus parvus*), Small Green Bee-eaters, White Breasted Kingfishers, Pied Kingfishers, Spotted Dove (*Streptopelia chinensis*) and Little Brown Dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*), Small Pratincole (*Glareola lactea*) and Large Grey Babbler (*Turdoides malcomi*) among others.

We arrived at the school in the late evening and were put up in a lovely guesthouse. Our arrival at the guesthouse was heralded by the call of a Pied Crested Cuckoo (*Clamator jacobinus*). After a quick dinner we turned in.

26<sup>th</sup> May: I spent the day roaming around the lovely campus. We came across Iora (*Aegithina tiphia*), Magpie Robin (*Copsychus saularis*) and Purple Sunbird (*Nectarinia asiatica*). Hoopoe House on the campus lived up to its name, affording sightings of a Hoopoe every day that I was there. Also spotted on our first day were White-browed Bulbul (*Pycnonotus luteolus*), White Headed Babblers (*Turdoides affinis*) and Tree Pies (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*). Quite a number of Lesser Goldenbacked Woodpeckers (*Dinopium benghalense*) were seen during the three days I stayed there, a couple were even spotted from the porch of the guesthouse.

27<sup>th</sup> May: Suhel set off to scout around for Crow's nests in the villages surrounding, along with his able assistant Somnath and yours truly (not so able). Armed with long bamboo ladders that we tied on top of Suhel's Gypsy we set off for the neighbouring villages. The search for crows nests proved highly entertaining, to the kids in the villages at least. We intrepid naturalists faced the challenges head on. The challenges included, guided missiles launched by disgruntled birds, which unerringly reached their targets. Since quite a few Pond Heron's were nesting near the crows we had two species to deal with. One thing that struck me in some of the villages we visited was the number of House Sparrows - there seemed to be quite a number of them. Though we saw a large number of males, there were very few females. We counted 15 males before we saw a single female. After a good morning's work of clambering up trees or in my case of watching others clamber up trees, we went back to lunch. Post lunch we visited the village closest to the school, where we came across a house with a large number of sparrow nests. After a survey of this village we went back to the school, and I set off on my own to explore the hills behind the school. Some of the interesting sightings along the way were Red Whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*), Tawny Eagle (*Aquila vindhiana*). The most interesting sighting was that of a different looking barbet, which refused to keep still. After a long wait it showed itself fully and after a proper examination it was found to be a juvenile Coppersmith Barbet (*Megalaima haemacephala*).

28<sup>th</sup> May: This was my last day here. I set off not so early, again loafing around campus. Was treated to the spectacle of two brightly coloured lizards fighting, like one of those old Japanese monster movies in a much lower budget, but then again I cannot complain, I did watch it for free after all. Speaking of brightly coloured, I also managed to see a male Small Minivet (*Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*), and a large number of Hoopoes. In the evening a few of us, including a few teachers from the school, set off for a small hike up the hills to one of the highest points around. On the way we saw an Indian Robin's nest with two eggs in it. Finally we arrived at our destination, which gave us a fabulous view of the valley all around. We could see the rain falling in the distance and the clouds moving towards us. We got back before dark, I packed my bags and after dinner caught the bus to Madanapalle and from there another bus to Chennai. All in all it was a wonderful experience and I had great fun.

## Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

**S**ongsters (of an avian nature) in the city are few and far between. There are, of course, several species that attempt to be songsters, but there are precious few who actually succeed in the attempt. However, there is one melodious chap who can claim the crown amongst the avian tenors. I refer, of course, to that perky little black-and-white bird, the Magpie Robin. This month, I have had a pair appearing regularly on the balcony so, I think I cannot do better than to tell of Magpie Robins in this month's instalment of these memoirs.

The Magpie Robin is, without a doubt, a bird singularly gifted in the matter of making sweet music. Their song is lilting and melodious and, moreover, their repertoire too is vast. At the same time, they are also rather natty in appearance and all these properties combine to make a bird that is a very pleasing addition to the balcony fauna, both in terms of the eyes and the ears. Small wonder then, that their patronage of the balcony these days makes me neglect work and spend considerable a considerable portion of my spare time in the balcony.

In the days of long ago, when we lived in a large and rambling old house in the city, there was an earthen pot slung on the end of a long metal pole. This pot had originally been home for a pair of pigeon squeakers who had proved unfaithful and had gone off with a large flock that colonised the balconies of the apartment block opposite the old house. The pot was then taken over by a pair of Magpie Robins who found it a capital place to build their nest. They were so captivated by the place that they made it their almost permanent residence. We recorded that they nested there for more than five years in succession. And not only did they nest there, but they became welcome visitors to the breakfast table. They male was very partial to scrambled eggs – he liked them better even than bread crumbs. And the family soon learnt that it was expected to provide a plate of scrambled eggs for the birds on a daily basis. On the rare occasions that this social obligation was forgotten, the bird had no hesitation in flying onto the table, staring around at which plate had scrambled eggs on it, and then helping himself lavishly. This particular pair, along with the numerous offspring they produced, almost became household pets; considerable portions of daily conversation were devoted to their doings. The family only deserted us when we moved out of the old house.

The pair that visits the balcony these days is showing signs of settling down in the area. I am not, unfortunately, in a position to supply them with an earthen pot slung on the top of a metal pole, but I have no doubt that the birds will soon find something suitable. There is a considerable growth of bramble in the vicinity of the stream behind the apartment building and it would not be stretching the imagination to suppose that the birds may well find some convenient place therein to lay their eggs and bring up their brood. And I shall look forward to that with the keenest interest since the young of the Magpie Robins are extremely quaint little creatures with whom it is a pleasure to hobnob. The many young of the pair at the old house were my especial favourites and I was forever trying to get on friendly terms with them. Sometimes one or the other rediprocated by condescending to help itself from my plate at breakfast, but for the most part, they preferred to breakfast from their own breakfast bowl.

In the city, if you have a decent garden, with perhaps a bit of bushy undergrowth, there is a strong possibility that you may have a pair in residence. The birds are quite bold and do themselves very well in urban gardens. I recollect that at the Madras Crocodile Bank there were a large number of these birds in permanent residence. They used to nest in the nooks and crannies of the staff quarters – I have a record of no less than six nests from the place. And apart from filling the place with their young, they provided the added attraction of filling the air with their very pleasant songs all day. The male bird, in particular, is a very talented singer and his output is one calculated to lift the spirits of the listener to no little extent. He combines whistles, twitters, cheeps, tweets and song with the aplomb of the born artiste, and I personally have always been much moved by his music. His wife is not quite so talented, but she also has enough of a voice to make her quite popular in the singing department of the avian world.

A near relative of these birds, the Shama, is celebrated throughout his domain as the best songster in the country. I have sometimes bent an ear to the concert provided by this fellow and can unhesitatingly say that the pundits, who named him as the songster of the country had a profound talent for understating the facts! The Shama is, in my humble opinion, the best songster in the Oriental region; and I don't care who hears me say it! It may be argued then, that a bird with so august a relation would be a considerable show-off but such is not the case. The Magpie Robin is an unobtrusive character and quite content to go through life as a little known fellow,



happy in the music he makes for the pleasure of those listeners who have the time and the inclination to listen to him.

The pair on the balcony, in common with their relations of my childhood days, are partial to scrambled eggs as part of their diet. Then have not yet reached the stage of helping themselves from my plate while I am partaking of breakfast from it, but they are bold enough if I stand at the other end of the balcony and affect to ignore them. The hen, in particular, is quite fond of that part of the eggs which comes from the yellow. And it is interesting to note their behaviour when feeding on this offering. Both the hen and her mate hop up to the plate, daintily pick up a small piece and then hop to the water bowl. Carefully they dip their scrap of egg into the water and thoroughly wash it – only then is it eaten. Nothing I say can make them change this habit – if they get scrambled eggs; they have to wash them first! Probably being extra careful with the calories...! I gave some considerable thought to this sanitary habit of theirs and came to the conclusion that the birds got it from their first attempt at the scrambled eggs. The first time they helped themselves from my plate (I may add that I was absent from the plate at that time), the eggs had been already liberally salted and peppered, ready for my consumption. I can readily imagine that a bird that has once been treated to salted and peppered eggs may well hesitate to eat any further offerings, in case they have been similarly treated. It seems to me that the birds solved it by washing the food thoroughly before partaking of it. If this be the correct explanation, then it argues intelligence of a very high order!

Although partial to scrambled eggs, the normal diet of these chaps is midges, insects and such-like. I have sometimes seen one performing a kind of wild dervish dance in a bush; twirling and leaping and hopping and generally carrying on as though he were possessed. At such times, I generally found, on investigation, that the bush was the local club for all the midges and flies of the area, and the Magpie Robin was helping itself with a very lavish hand. At such times, they seem not to stand on any ceremony but believe in wading in and getting their full share, with perhaps a little bit more for good measure. And even when doing so, they do not forget to occasionally pause in their eating and warble a few notes, presumably in the hope that it may bring further delicacies into their ken!

Personally, as I said earlier, I have a soft spot for these birds and am always glad to see them around. They also, as I said, lend tone and distinction to the balcony residents. And now that the pair is showing distinct signs of settling down and adopting me, I am much gratified. The cock bird has decided that I am nothing more than a rather strangely shaped perch and he sometimes suits the actions to the words by perching on my outstretched foot. The hen is a bit more cautious and believes in a thorough study before she will accept so curious a perch. So she contents herself by hopping around at my feet, occasionally peering cautiously up at me, as I sit there beaming down on these august visitors. And if you have them in your area and are possessed of an ear for music, do take some time out to listen to the Magpie Robins: They are in full song these days. Till next time... Happy Birding!

## PROJECT TO STUDY THE SPARROW POPULATIONS OF HYDERABAD

By Humayun Taher

In the last issue of Pitta, we had asked for volunteers to take part in a project to study the populations of House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), in the city. We have started this project during this month. Shafaat Ulla saab and myself visited areas around Srinagar Colony, Ameerpur and Yousufguda to check sparrow populations and likely areas. Although we did not see a large number, we did identify three small pockets, where there appeared to be a small population of these birds. In all, in over two hours of field work, we were able to spot three different populations of these birds. The largest flock was a total of around 32 birds and the smallest was a total of 4 birds.

We are determined to continue this project and see if we can build up a database of House Sparrow populations for the twin cities. We again request for volunteers to send in their names if they are interested in taking part in the field work. For all members, we appeal to them that, if they are aware of any populations of sparrows in their areas, please do let us know of them, along with probable numbers, exact locations and a description of the habitat of the area, and any observations such as breeding or roosting. This information would be of material help in compiling the database of sparrow populations of the city.



## New Drug Offers Vulture Lifeline

A new report has sent a glimmer of hope for the three species of Asian vultures threatened with extinction.

Slender-billed (*Gyps tenuirostris*), Indian (*G. indicus*) and White-rumped Vultures (*G. bengalensis*) in South Asia have suffered one of the most rapid and widespread population

declines of any bird species: more than 97% loss over the last 10-15 years.

At first, the population collapse was believed to be caused by a virus. But in late 2003, researchers from Washington State University, working with The Peregrine Fund announced that they had discovered vulture deaths were caused by the use of a veterinary drug called diclofenac. Used throughout the Indian subcontinent, this drug kills vultures that feed on the dead bodies of recently treated livestock.

To combat diclofenac's devastating effects on vulture populations, the Indian government announced in March 2005 its intention to phase it out. However, progress has been hampered by the lack of an alternative drug known to be safe for vultures yet effective for treating livestock.

In a report published in January 2006, a team of scientists led by Gerry Swan of the University of Pretoria found that meloxicam is an alternative to diclofenac that is harmless to vultures but is equally effective in treating livestock. It has recently become available for veterinary use in India and could therefore be used to replace diclofenac.

Publication of the results was timely because the Indian government had just convened an international meeting to decide how to save the endangered vultures.

"It is essential that the government of India acts quickly to make good use of this new information. Diclofenac must be replaced by meloxicam as soon as possible and there are many things the government can do to speed this up," said Dr. Asad Rahmani, Director of the Bombay Natural History Society.

The vulture declines have had profound ecological and social consequences. Vultures play a vital role in environmental health by disposing of carcasses and reducing the risk of disease.

The two key steps necessary to save vultures from extinction are removal of diclofenac from their food chain, and the establishment of conservation centres for captive breeding as a stop-gap measure until that is achieved.

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### THE COMMON HAWK-CUCKOO (*Cuculus varius*)

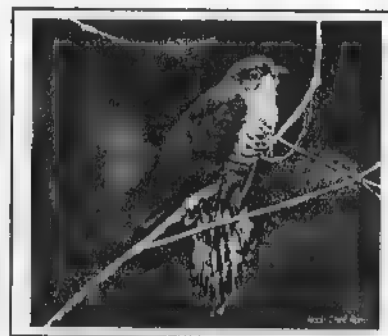
**T**he Common Hawk-Cuckoo, or Brainfever Bird (*Cuculus varius*) is a pigeon-sized slender bird with a long tail and the basic cuckoo shape. It is ashy-grey above and whitish below with longitudinal cross-barring in brown. The tail is barred in broad black. The sexes are alike. Seen fleetingly and in the thick undergrowth, the bird bears a striking resemblance to the Shikra hawk; hence the name.

This bird is found throughout the Indian sub-continent, from the foothills of the Himalayas down to the Deccan. It is also found in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. In these regions it is an inhabitant of wooded country, light forests, gardens, fruit groves and mango topes, close to human habitation. The normal diet of the birds consist of hairy caterpillars, insects, berries and wild figs. The birds are partially resident but local migration is seen.

The Hawk-Cuckoo, like all cuckoos, is nest parasitic and this species is parasitic on the nests of the *Turdoides* Babblers. It usually lays a single egg in each nest, the egg bearing a remarkable resemblance to that of its unwilling host. The young are reared to maturity by the foster parents.

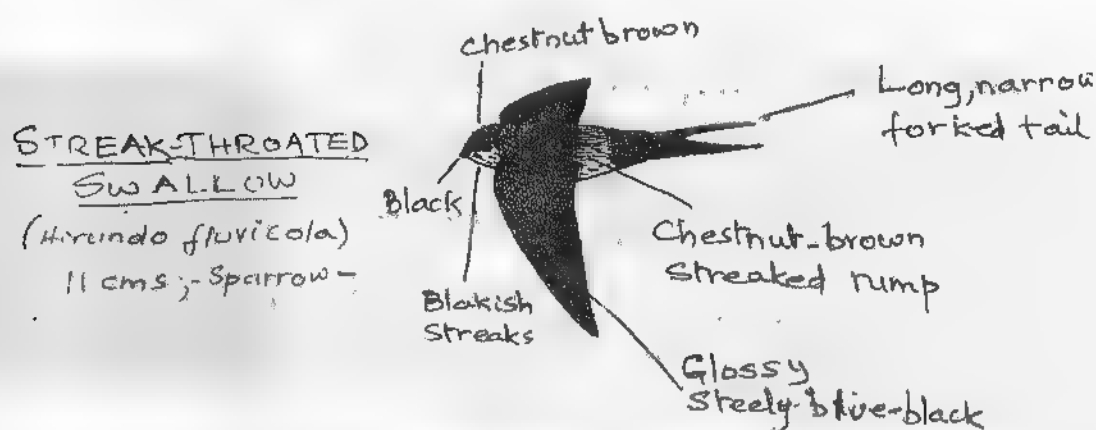
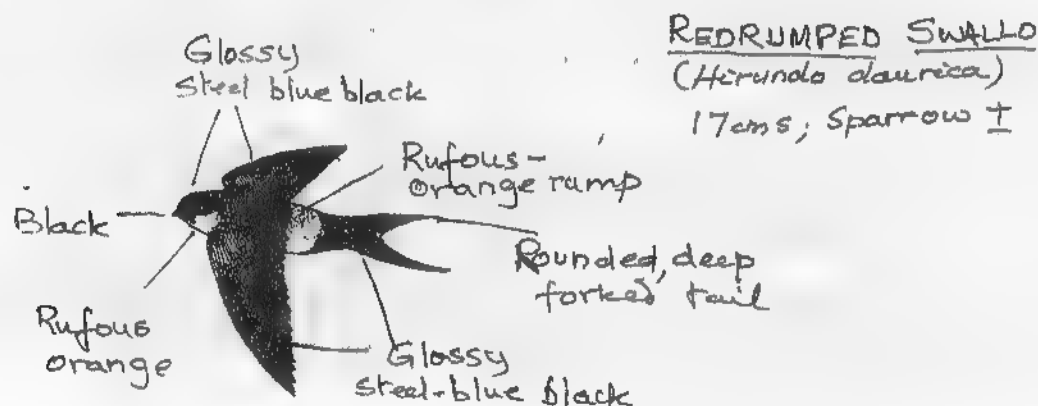
The most noticeable feature of the birds is their loud and very distinctive call. Their common name of Brainfever Bird is a rendering of their call and also on account of the persistence with which they keep on calling, the calls starting slow and rising to crescendo before abruptly ending. This call is heard throughout the day towards the start of the monsoon rains. The call is also frequently heard during moonlit nights. In keeping with other members of the cuckoo tribe, the birds often call at precisely 3 in the morning.

The birds are not common despite their name, but there is evidence to suggest that, in the proper season, they are found throughout their range in sizeable numbers. They are, as with all other species, threatened by loss of habitat and the popular practice of cutting down of the indigenous species of trees and replacing them with exotic species which are not conducive to the birds. Still, they are often to be heard even in the heart of the city and can usually be seen in the many parks and gardens in the city, especially in places where there is scrub cover. Still, some protection is necessary for the birds and their habitat and it would be a good plan to afford them some.



## FIELD CRAFT - By Siraj Taher and Sachin Jaitare

**SWALLOWS: (*Hirundinidae*)** – Swallows are graceful birds with long wings and long forked tails. They fly banking and twisting with effortless beauty as they catch insects in their wide mouths.



## PIGEON POST

By E-Mail on 10 June 2006

Just read Shafaat's article "Where have all the Sparrows gone! To Dubai?" Thought he might be interested to know that I saw some (plenty actually) in Ooty.

Please forward this to him, as I do not have his email address.

Vikram  
[vikramdevrao@gmail.com](mailto:vikramdevrao@gmail.com)

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For information, write to: Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India.

Editors: Aasheesh Pittie, Siraj A. Taher, Humayun Taher.

Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: [baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk); [humayun.taher@gmail.com](mailto:humayun.taher@gmail.com)

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### Field Outings

**Sunday, 27<sup>th</sup> August 2006: Mahavir Harina Vanasthali, Vanasthalipuram** - Route: Via Vanasthalipuram on RFC road. The park is on the left side of the main road. Assemble at the gates by 7.15-7.30. Some cars may start from Punjagutta Cross-roads. Originally planned and started as a sanctuary for the endangered Black Buck, the park now holds considerable numbers of Chital also. On the birding front, there should be Rosy Pastors and other small woodland birds. Ground birds are considerably rarer now than they used to be, still there could be Peafowl, Partridge and Stone Curlews. Nightjars are also seen on occasions. Earlier there used to be a nesting Short-toed Eagle here and the place also attracted Vultures. Scavenger Vultures also used to nest in the park and may be seen occasionally. Plenty of Hawk-cuckoos and occasional Greenbilled Malkoha also. Warblers also for those who are keen on LBJ's. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks.

For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3293 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

## NEWS & NOTES

### Field Trip to Sanjeevaiah Park – 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2006

By Sharada Annamaraju

**I**t was a cold, grey and dull morning with an overcast sky at Sanjeevaiah Park, where around twenty BSAP members converged for yet another session of birding. The weather was pretty gloomy, but it didn't dampen our enthusiasm. While most of us arrived by 7:30 a.m., Dr. Praveen Sardesai and Mr. Rajeev Matthew who had got there an hour earlier had already seen quite a lot of purple sunbirds, a couple of Copper Smith Barbets and loads of House Sparrows (Yes! House sparrows!) in a parking lot opposite the park. Heaps of sparrows were there even when we arrived, and once inside the park we saw a dozen more. All in all we sighted approximately 50 sparrows during the session. It was so nice to hear their chirping notes and see them flitting about and bouncing all over the trees.

In the parking lot there was a Golden Oriole, a few Ashy Prinias, an Indian Robin and lots of House Crows. There was a pair of Pled Mynas too, stuffing their shabby-looking nest with scraps of litter, on a tree just beyond the park gate. We had a long look at the birds and their activity. We didn't see any more of their nests in the area, though we saw quite a few of the birds themselves, flying about.

In the water beyond the railings to the left of the park, many Little Grebes and dumpy looking Common Coots were swimming placidly in the water. But as soon as a few of us approached the railing to get a better look at them, they all flew away, flapping their wings rapidly and skimming along the surface of the water. One Little Grebe, quite unmindful of our presence just a few feet away didn't seem to care that his friends had flown to settle a little farther away. Then he turned his head sideways, took one look at us and beat a hasty retreat to join the other grebes! A White-breasted Kingfisher called out a few times in the distance, hidden out of sight. A Little Egret flew about and landed gently in the water beyond the railing. A Jungle Babbler, looking all frowzy and untidy sat on a little cement construction. White Headed Babbler flew one behind the other and landed in a thicket. One Ashy Prinia with a bit of cottony looking stuffing in its beak was surreptitiously entering a dried up bush... a nest surely.

We walked on and reached a tiny water body surrounded by thick reeds, a little away from the gate. Here three Little Cormorants were dunking into the water now and then, surfacing after a while. I carried out a little experiment here. I held my breath for as long as the cormorants were underwater and found myself gasping for breath by the time they surfaced!! I couldn't time their underwater pursuits for I was busy going blue in the face. Conclusion—Cormorants can hold



their breath for a long, long time and one shouldn't try silly stunts like I did! Apart from the cormorants, there were a Common (Indian) Moorhen and a Pond Heron in the water body. A Black Kite made a brief appearance over Hussain Sagar in the distant sky, and it looked more grey than brown. Actually, all the birds had a tinge of grey to them because of the weather! A couple of Red-wattled Lapwings called out nearby. We saw another one sitting a little further ahead on an island of garbage in shallow water near the park. Then Mr. Choudhary pointed out a couple of Spotted Owlets sitting groggily on a tall, slim tree with dark coloured bark. One of them faced the other way, while the other winked down at us with one eye closed. Soon it shut its other eye too and dozed off. The Koels of the park didn't share the owls' idea of spending the day asleep, and were zipping about calling out to each other. *Kuoo, kuoo, kuoo!* called the male and *Kik, Kik, Kik!* was the female's response.

We walked ahead and reached a bend where we saw more Little Grebes and Coots in the water behind the railings. We also saw four Black Drongos on the way. Here the group split into two. Our group of six moved along the waterfront. There was a Large Pied Wagtail on another island of trash and four Spotbilled ducks zipped overhead. A tiny little sparrow whooshed out from nowhere, chirping loudly and disappeared behind the trees. A little ahead, garbage was being burnt near the railings. The rising smoke had a misty appearance, like in a beautiful hill-station in winter. And then we noticed all those drooping Allamanda plants, with their leaves singed by the fire and the flowers slumped over. We strode ahead and hit a new

path surrounded by overgrown grass on either side. Here we were confronted with bizarre looking trees lining the path. The tree had big, showy, pink coloured flowers growing at the end of long, thick and woody stalks. The buds were thick, green and fleshy. Flowers sprouted from the trunk at the base of the tree and not from the top. At first we thought they might be epiphytes and later that they could be orchids. But something told us we were way off track and what we were looking at was a proper tree. We let go of the identification business of the 'upside-down' tree and moved on. (We later found out that this tree is called the "Cannonball Tree").

Large grey Babblers hopped about on the path in front of us, also more crows and Common Mynas. The path led us back to where the members had split up earlier. We took another path and reached a grassy area. We plonked down on the sweet smelling grass and gobbled sandwiches. A Cattle Egret, which joined us for breakfast snapped up insects nearby. Our breakfast done, we made our way back out of the park. On the way back we saw a sweet little squirrel with a huge nut stuffed in its mouth. It bounced out of our way and scrambled up into the higher branches of a tree. Another Coppersmith barbet presented itself a few metres from the main gate. It allowed us a clear view and we had a nice, long look at it, before it flew off. We were at the gate now, and did I miss out mentioning any more bird names? Oh yes, we had seen a couple of Red-vented Bulbuls, Spotted Doves and a Coucal too. And here we came to the end of another BSAP outing. We walked out of the gate and headed home reminiscing about the day's sightings.

## Trip report: Naldehra, Himachal Pradesh

By Ranjan Matthew

The first week of July brought new hopes to the Matthew family in Delhi, practically like every other month in the year. So we decided to make the most of the summer and go for a vacation. The question of where to go was solved easily by stepping outside the house and feeling the sun scorch your neck and other exposed body parts. "TO THE HILLS" everyone shouted at once. A car was hired, suitcases hastily packed, and for me, 'A Field Guide to the Birds of India' by Krys Kazmierczak, a pair of binoculars, and a hat. I hadn't been birding in a few years and thought the northern hills would be a terrific place to get re-acquainted with the hobby. So into the car we jumped, a quick grunt from the driver (it was 7 am) and we were off.

The road to Shimla took us through Chandigarh which did not have any spectacular sightings except for the usual mynas and crows. We were to spend one night at Chandigarh and proceed on to Shimla the next morning. Other than a bit of sight seeing and lazing around, there was nothing our good old' BSAP members would like to read about (for all the food fanatics, the dhabas along the way were simply exquisite).

The drive to Shimla was pleasant after the initial hectic traffic on the highway, accidents and the usual. It seemed that the majority of the population was rushing off to the hills in the summer because for a moment there on the highway, I thought I was stuck at Panjagutta crossroads! I wondered then whether we would actually get any peace and quiet at all at our destination. In fact, I had nightmares sleeping in the car, visualizing Naldehra as a place with hordes of tourists, some feeding the wildlife with Lays chips, soon after which they threw the packet into the forest. These unsettling thoughts were soon disposed after we crossed Shimla, where there was little or no traffic whatsoever. It seemed that Shimla sved off all the tourists. We reached Naldehra successfully and checked into a beautiful little resort called The Chalets. Just behind our cottage was a beautiful coniferous forest stretching as far as the eye could see. An 18 hole golf course stood a few hundred metres down the road from the resort. Being a golf lover and a birding maniac, Naldehra seemed everything I could ever want in a vacation.

Early next morning in the garden (of the cottage), I spotted a variety of birds. The first was a family of house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*). They were very busy hunting and didn't really care about us sitting around. Suddenly from out the

wall behind us hopped a bird I thought to be a species of Babbler. I even moved up close to take several photographs followed by a short video which my sister took. There were a few more of these 'babblers' in the garden as well. I would research the photos on my laptop later in the evening. The sighting that really caught me off guard was this really tiny flying creature that was moving from flower to flower hovering briefly above each one and moving to the next. This was unbelievable! It was much smaller than a flower pecker and moved exactly like a humming bird. Again plenty of photos were taken of this creature, which my father and mother said was a moth. I simply refused to believe it and said it was a humming bird. Sadly, I couldn't find a humming bird or any bird that small in the bird book!

After breakfast my father and I went golfing while my mother and sister went for a hike through the woods. The golf course proved to be more of an obstacle course than a golf course. After 15 holes I felt as if I had just completed a triathlon! My father and I stumbled back to the cottage in a zombie-like trance and collapsed. Dinner came soon afterwards followed by a very restful sleep.

The next two days went more or less the same way. Get up, breakfast, golf, dinner, sleep. This timetable was briefly punctuated by a few odd sightings. A very beautiful Green-backed Tit (*Parus monticolus*) also which I photographed, sat on a near by twig just behind the cottage. Its slightly yellowish green belly glared at me as I clicked the photos. It flew shortly afterwards into the forest. At this point the little flying creature came in again doing its rounds of all the flowers in the garden. Surprisingly it let me move in to about a hands length distance of it to take videos and pictures. I ran soon after it flew away to my laptop and transferred all the images. Zooming to a very high extent into the 'flying creature's' pictures proved that it had feelers. And even what I thought to be the beak on this creature was a curvy long proboscis. What was fascinating about it was the way it flew and its feather-covered body. It looked just like a tiny little humming bird! Well, that mystery was sorted out, now to move on to the others. The bird which looked like a babbler was actually a Laughing Thrush, a Streaked Laughing Thrush (*Garrulax lineatus*).

We drove to a nearby area called 'Tatta pani'. A place which was famous for its sulphur springs. It was on the banks of the Sutlej River. On the way my father spotted a Crested Bunting (*Melophus lathami*) on the road. Its plumage was brilliant and it really stood out on the road. Also spotted on a tree just off the road was a Himalayan Bulbul (*Pycnonotus leucogenys*). We stopped the car and gazed at this lone bird which seemed like a disguised Red-whiskered Bulbul, except for the yellow vent and white cheeks. A few more of these were spotted while we drove along. An Accipiter was seen sitting on a twig but it shot off too quickly to get a better look. High in the sky flew a large bird of prey. Since I'm not very good at identifying this kind of bird (eagles, vultures etc.), I left it at that.

The river was extremely muddy, and the sulphur water hot and reeking of hydrogen sulphide gas. Not many people were around, but what was plentiful everywhere was the marijuana plant (*Cannabis sativa*). The local restaurant owner proceeded to tell us that plenty of foreigners came all year round to collect this 'super grass' and even many locals harvested them too. At this point, our driver took the initiative to explain the three different kinds of 'high' achieved through this plant. We found this to be extremely funny. The burning sun soon forced us to depart from this 'hippie wonderland' and start the drive home. On the way back, a magnificent vulture flew right by the side of the car and sat down on a nearby tree. I told the driver to stop, grabbed the camera and binoculars and ran towards it. Thankfully it did not fly away. I managed to take a few photos as it took flight startling a nearby Jungle Crow. Further studying the pictures of the vulture didn't tell me much about it except that on comparison with the Jungle crow, it wasn't much larger. The colours and plumage however pointed towards the King, or Red-headed Vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus*). I could not confirm it however.

The next morning was a wonderful sunny day and our last at Naldehra. At the golf course, I saw a low flying Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) with its tell tale white and black combination.

Back at the cottage in the afternoon while I was sitting in the garden, an extremely bright red bird flew in and sat on a large flower. Out came the camera and click... click... click it went. I could make out it was a sunbird. The upper half of its body was red and the lower half was brown. It had a shiny blackish green patch on top of its head which shone brilliantly in the sun light. This sunbird only seemed to sit on a certain kind of flower and ignored the rest. As I ran back home to check out the pictures my eyes fell on a curious little bird hopping up the side of a pine tree. It was a dull brown and mostly spotted from what I could see. It moved up the tree with relative ease and it disappeared among the higher branches. Its small size distinguished it from any woodpecker I've seen before. After I inspected the photographs of the sunbird, I decided it was the Crimson Sunbird (*Aethopyga siparaja*). The other tree climbing bird which I saw I figured had to be a Creeper. I didn't see enough of it to distinguish which creeper it was.

We bid farewell to Naldehra in the wee hours of the next morning. The air was wonderfully cool, and the sun just emerging over the hills. As we passed the golf course and were driving through the forest a small flock of birds were seen in the middle of the road. As we approached they quickly ran up the hilly sides into the forest. The driver, now familiar with my interest in birds pointed and shouted "Jungle Murga!" I didn't think I saw the bright plumage of the male Junglefowl at all. A quick inspection of Krys's book told me that Junglefowl were not found at this altitude (Naldehra is over 3000m), let alone

found in coniferous forests. The driver and my father started a conversation about 'Jungle murgae' while I combed the road ahead for more of these birds. Luckily we ran into another party. This time they looked like pheasants. They ran off the road and stopped just on the slopes of the hill in the bushes. I could see a few brown birds among a few darker birds which quickly disappeared into the growth. I still couldn't identify what it was and decided to show the pheasant plates in the book to my father. He promptly pointed at the Kalij Pheasant (*Lophura leucomelanos*) and said that he had seen similar tails and a red face. I however was extremely displeased that I couldn't identify them. They were definitely NOT 'Jungle murgae' however.

The rest of the journey to Chandigarh was uneventful except for a lovely dhaba where we stopped for lunch. We were all happy with our trip to Naldehra and were already missing the clean and cool air, its friendly people, the wildlife, forests and the golf course. I highly recommend going there, as there is lots of forest to explore, plenty of birds to be identified, and Naldehra is not a crowded place at all. In fact, it is nicely tucked in to a remote area in the hills in Himachal Pradesh. Anyone wishing to get away from all the traffic and get a breath of really fresh air, go to Naldehra!

## Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

Recently, I obtained a new device for attracting birds to the balcony. This was a rather splendid sugar solution dispenser. I believe it was originally intended to be used in the South American countries to attract Hummingbirds to the garden but it worked capably here also to attract certain distant relatives of the Hummingbirds. With the aid of this device a further species of bird joined the balcony list. A very colourful chap is the Purple Sunbird. A pair has started to use the sugared water being dispensed by the aforementioned gadget so I shall spend some time this month telling about these smallest of the balcony residents.

Small the birds may be, but they are also amongst the most cheerful of the visitors. Constantly they twitter away to each other as they take turns hovering over the tube that dispenses their nourishment. Daintily they sip at the solution as it feeds through the pipe into the little bowl, conveniently placed where their little curved beaks can reach it. And all the while, they continue their conversation with each other and with the world at large. I am not sure if I am also included in their audience because my presence seems to curb their enthusiasm for singing, but when I am well hidden, they give full rein to their song, and very sweet music it is, too.

To anyone not knowing these birds, it is a matter of considerable mystery that the sexes are so different. The male resembles a little animated jewel with his glistening amethyst-like purple plumage. In certain light conditions he appears almost black, but catch him in the light and he shimmers purple as he darts through the trees searching for little midges and spiders to feed his young. The hen is soberly clad in hues of grey, brown and yellow, tastefully arranged to present a fairly striking appearance, but not to be mentioned in the same breath as her spouse. Notwithstanding this discrepancy in colours, the pair is equally hardworking, both sharing in the domestic chores and taking care of the eggs and young. I am convinced that there is a nest in the area but I have been unsuccessful in my attempts to locate it. The birds are adept at hiding their home and on this occasion they have surpassed themselves in this venture.

I have had other occasions to study their home life though. The nest of the Sunbirds is a very shabbily elegant and interesting structure. It somewhat resembles the artistic nest of the weaver birds, in that it is similarly shaped. It hangs from the tip of some leafy bough and can easily be mistaken for a bit of rubbish hanging from the tree. The birds disguise it very effectively with bits of rubbish stuck vaguely around on the outside and the finished structure looks like a ball of dead leaves, bits of paper and sundry hairs caught in the wind and hanging from the tree. Inside this elaborately disguised nest is a cosily lined chamber where the birds lay their pea-sized eggs, incubate them and hatch out tiny replicas of themselves. No bigger than small bumble-bees, the naked youngsters are most insistent in their demand for sustenance. The adults do their best to keep up the supply of earwigs, tiny spiders and similar delicacies but the youngsters never seem to have enough. On the occasions when I parted the leaves of the opening and peered inside a conveniently placed nest, the chicks immediately woke up, stretched their scrawny necks to the utmost and, opening wide their little maws, imperiously demanded that sustenance be immediately provided. I regret I had nothing more interesting in my hand than a rather grubby notebook in which to record the goings-on inside the nest, and I somehow felt that pieces of paper torn out of the notebook would not appeal to the birds. So I rather sorrowfully took my leave, with a quick apology to the young birds. Considering how hungry they appeared, they took my apology rather well, I thought. Still, I was very young at that time so they probably excused me on account of my juvenile appearance.

The birds on the balcony, like the Tailor Birds, also look in the corners for spiders but the housemaid continues to be tireless in her pursuit of cobwebs so the birds find nothing interesting here. They therefore confine their attention to the feeder and do themselves rather well. I have also seen them on occasion hovering over the water bowl and taking a couple of sips from it. Doubtless the sugar solution in the feeder makes them a trifle thirsty. Or they could be taking the water back to the nest for their progeny; I'm not quite sure. They are still very shy when I am in the balcony so I am forced to watch their antics in proxy (through a crack in the window). Still, they are



relatively new visitors so they probably need to acclimatise themselves to the close proximity of a human animal. To birds of their size, we probably appear goliaths.

It would be interesting to learn exactly how small these birds are. I remember attending a bird ringing camp long ago, when I was considerably younger than I am now. During one expedition to the nets, we found a male purple sunbird caught in the net. The unfortunate part was that the bird had not been discovered early enough and it had been caught for a considerable period of time, certainly not less than an hour. So we did not stress him out more than necessary. A quick tightening of the ring around his little leg, some swift measurements and we released him. If I am not mistaken, the size was somewhat smaller than my little finger, which makes it around 2 - 3 inches long. They have the distinction of being one of the smallest species of birds that are commonly seen around, and also one of the boldest, for their size. I have seen the little male on the balcony buffeting a pigeon around, a bird about ten times his size. He did this quite fearlessly, as though to say "Even when they are that size, they don't scare me..." The pigeons, I am sorry to say, rather invite this persecution, through their bad habit of sticking their beaks into the sugar solution dispenser. They have no use for the stuff, but they must needs stick their noses everywhere and ascertain what is on offer. This habit naturally causes the pigeons to fall foul of the sunbird, who rather fancies that he owns that feeder and trespassers have to be very sternly dealt with.

I have had the opportunity to study the nesting of these birds in some detail. They build quite readily in gardens with a few scraggly trees and some bushes around to provide them with spiders and midges to feed the chicks. As I said, most of the nests were of the shabby type outside and could easily be overlooked. But when you see Purple Sunbirds making frequent trips to a particular area, you keep the eyes peeled

and you will soon spy out the nest. What is interesting is how much tension the nest can take. I have seen the male perched on his front porch, juggling with some hair that he was trying to pass to his wife, who was at that time inside the nest trying to incorporate the hair into the nest lining. Even allowing for the almost negligible weight of the birds, still that must have put a great strain on the strands of grass that held the nest to the anchoring branch. Happily, the nest took it without as much as a creak. Very strong architecture, almost on a par with the celebrated weaver birds...

I would suggest that if you have a garden in your area, keep the eyes peeled and also the ears for quick, excited twitterings and you may well have the opportunity to see one of these little jewels flashing through the trees. But be prepared to do some earnest spotting. For all his very vivid colouring, the male Purple Sunbird is not as conspicuous as he sounds. He has the intelligence to sit in the shadows of the trees. And in this light-dark environment, he is all but invisible. The hen is even more inconspicuous; but what gives them away is their very restlessness. Stare at the tree where you hear the twitterings, and the birds will almost always give themselves away through their activity, hopping from here to there and jumping around and occasionally hovering briefly in front of a convenient flower to stick their slender bills into the flower's core and sipping the nectar. They require constant feeding, and even though nectar is very strengthening, they still manage to get down about twice their body weight each day. And their figures are still kept in check by the active life they lead, which precludes anything in the nature of corpulence creeping into their little figures.

So this month, concentrate on little black birds and the odds are that they will turn out to be amethyst coloured Purple Sunbirds. Keep watching them. Until next time, Happy Birding...

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### THE LARGE PIED WAGTAIL (*Motacilla maderaspatensis*)

**T**he Large Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla maderaspatensis*) is a medium-sized passerine bird of the wagtail family *Motacillidae*, which also includes the pipits and longclaws. It is a resident breeder in India. It is also known by its other name of White-browed Wagtail and the species name is derived from the Indian city of Madras now known as Chennai. This is the largest species of wagtail and it is one of the few that has adapted well to urban habitats and is often found perched on overhead water storages in residential buildings. The female has the black coloration less glossy than in the male.

It is found in open freshwater wetland habitats, such as river banks, canals, lakes and irrigation barrages. It generally prefers clear waters with grassy islands; resident throughout India except NW Himalayas, though found up to 1500 m. It is widespread in the North Indian plains.

The nesting season is from March to September. Its nest is a cup shaped pad of rootlets, hair, wool, and dry algae etc., built under a projecting rock among rafters of a dwelling house or under girders of a bridge-always near water. The eggs, usually from three to five, are grayish, brownish or greenish white, blotched and streaked with various shades of brown. Like other wagtails, this species is insectivorous.



The Large Pied Wagtail is a large wagtail at 21cm. This is a slender bird, with the characteristic long, constantly wagging tail of its genus. It has black upperparts, head and breast, with a white supercilium and large white wingbar. The rest of the underparts are white. Juveniles are brown-grey where the adult is black. It may be confused with the somewhat smaller Hodgson's Pied Wagtail, where both are found together in winter but this has an entirely white forehead.

The birds are not common despite their name, but there is evidence to suggest that, in the proper season, they are found throughout their range in sizeable numbers. They are, as with all other species, threatened by loss of habitat and the pollution of small ponds and streams, in the vicinity of which they habitually live. Still, they are often to be seen even in the heart of the city and can usually be seen in the many parks and gardens in the city, especially in places where there is scrub cover and a small pond. However, some protection is necessary for the birds and their habitat and it would be a good plan to afford them some.

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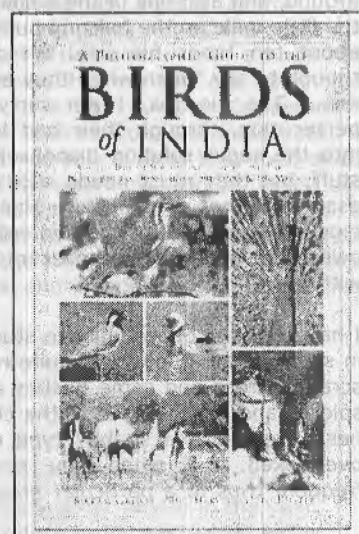
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**Bikram Grewal** has written more than twenty books on India, including three guides to its birds. He is a biodiversity expert for the Indian government. **Bill Harvey** is a lifelong birdwatcher who has lived throughout the Indian subcontinent. He published the first authoritative checklist on the birds of Bangladesh as well as numerous articles and is a cofounder of the Northern Indian Bird Network. **Otto Pfister** is a wildlife photographer whose work has appeared in numerous publications. He has also published several illustrated articles on birds.



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Editors: Aasheesh Pittie, Siraj A. Taher, Humayun Taher.

Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: [baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:baazdaar@yahoo.co.uk); [humayun.taher@gmail.com](mailto:humayun.taher@gmail.com)

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